

# traveller

## Rediscovering Thailand

10 destinations beyond the obvious



**Hidden Hills**

The highlands, from Chiang Rai to Chiang Mai

Fish-tailed boats  
on the Mae Kok  
river, Chiang Rai

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A walking trail through the hills around a Lahu village in northern Thailand

ARTUSHI DESHPANDE

## EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Vinod Mehta

## PUBLISHER

Maheshwer Peri

## EDITOR

Ka. Jabir Fries

## CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Bishwadeep Moitra

## MANAGING EDITOR

Nayantra Patel

## ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Amit Dixit

## ASSISTANT EDITOR

Sheetal Vyss

## PRINCIPAL CORRESPONDENT

Akshai Jain

## CORRESPONDENT

Radhika P. Nair

## DESIGN

Miyank Rai (Senior Designer)

Gushan Sharma

## ILLUSTRATORS

Sandeep Adhwaraju

## PHOTOGRAPHY

Sanjay Ghosh (Associate Photo Editor)

Shruti Singh (Researcher)

## LIBRARY

Alka Gupta

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### ASSOCIATE MANAGER

Bobby Mathews

### HEAD OFFICE

AB-10, S.J. Enclave, New Delhi 110029

Tel: 26191421, Fax: 26191420

e-mail: outlook@outlookindia.com

### OTHER OFFICES

MUMBAI Tel: 30612222 CALCUTTA

Tel: 40085012 CHENNAI

Tel: 2859250, 51

Telefax: 2859250

BANGALORE Tel: 25592806/07,

Fax: 25592810 HYDERABAD

Tel: 23375776 Telefax: 23375676

Printed and published by Maheshwer Peri

on behalf of Outlook Publishing (India)

Private Limited. Editor: Vinod Mehta.

Printed at Infomedia India Limited,

A Wing, Ruby House, J.K. Sawant Marg,

Dadar (West), Mumbai 400028, and

published from AB-10, S.J. Enclave,

New Delhi 110029

MILAN MOUDGILL



Pack animals bearing the load of the trekking expedition approach Ghami in Mustang

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Photograph: Dinodia Photo Library

Design: Bishwadeep Moitra

LETTER  
FROM  
THE  
EDITOR

DROP IN AT Traveller HQ one of these mornings and you're likely to catch me belting out a medley of bilingual sea shanties: 'Whiskey, Johnnie', 'Ob in Bombay, ob in Rio', 'Drunken sailor'... It's strictly an early

in the morning affliction, which tends to wear off before there are other hands on deck, thank God.

What brought it on was my recently concluded summer vacation, much of which I spent in a basement in a small town in Germany trawling through the flotsam of four generations of my family—three generations of whom had travelled the world by ship. Great-grandfather Fritz had served an apprenticeship as a steward before returning to shore to run his own hotel. Grandfather Heinrich had done the same (that's the nearest thing to a family crest, on the right). There was Fritz's sea chest, and Heinrich's cabin trunk and leather suitcases, festooned with the luggage labels of the *Cap Polonia*, the *Resolute* and other ships and great hotels in countless ports of call. A blue tin trunk emblazoned with my mother's initials, which had sailed with her from Accra to New York in 1961. Menus from my father's voyage to the same destination on the *Hanseatic*. All this and countless photographs, postcards and letters, which I waded through like a sentimental tourist. It was that kind of storeroom, packed with the stuff that had either outlived its owners or vice versa. Things that no one had any use for and no one could throw away. That task had fallen to me.



Well, the basement is empty and all I've brought back is my grandfather's favourite cassette, *Die schönsten Seemannslieder und Shanties*, currently installed in my car's audio deck. But the sea chest and cabin trunk are back on the high seas, stuffed to the gills with the family correspondence. And for the first time in my life, I'm waiting for a ship to come in.

—Kai Friese

## C O N T R I B U T O R S



Delhi works well for Milan Moudgill—it provides a good client base for his graphic design practice, and is close enough to the hills for a quick getaway. He is currently wearing a new hat—that of a 'tour organiser'—to fuel his travel, and his other passion—photography. Happily, it's worked. A group of 13 took this avatar seriously enough to follow him into remote Mustang and back.



Rimli Sengupta is a willing refugee from engineering academia. She has lately noticed, with increasing surprise and more than a hint of suspicion, articles appear in print bearing her name, which are completely free of math symbols. Some are not in English either. She is entirely intrigued by this trend and is following it closely for any new developments.



Latha Anantharaman lives a life of earnestness on a small farm in Kerala. She was cravenly grateful to *Outlook Traveller's* editors for sending her to a posh European city. She got her hair cut, found clothes that did not have red mud stains on them and spent a week scraping garden soil out from under her fingernails. And it was so worth it.



Mandavi Mehta is a student of art history and is pursuing her PhD. from the University of Pennsylvania. Mandavi first visited Chamba in Himachal Pradesh as part of her graduate programme and tries to revisit the region whenever possible. She is currently working on a documentary in Upper Assam.



>> *OT* issued another blockbuster issue with 'Retreat' (September 2008). I was not aware of spas around us that provide treatments for as little as Rs 2,500. The issue was an eye-opener.

**Sumit Sarkar, email**

>> Thank you, *OT*, for the spa special (September 2008). I am a regular reader of *OT* and I enjoyed the articles and photographs. After reading the issue I went to a nearby spa and when I stepped out after the massage I had a glow on my face, a revitalised body and peace of mind.

**Sonali Roy Choudhury, Delhi**

>> Thank you for an absolutely brilliant read ('Retreat', September 2008). This lucky body has been rubbed and bathed and massaged in some of the most beautiful places in the world. But it is hard to think of any one place that combines all the elements, natural and man-made, effectively. The top 10 spas mentioned by you seem to know how to maintain the quality and manage to consistently create a perfect experience.

**Anita George James, Kerala**

>> Ever since my younger days I have known a phrase: our body is like a temple. However, only a few pay due respect to this temple. I wonder how we Indians, despite being religious, desert our 'temple' after 25-30 years. You have proved with your September 2008 issue ('Retreat') that practising religion—in a structure of concrete and cement or flesh and blood—is not dependent upon age and status. It is a way of life that everybody should try to adhere to. Many congratulations once again for this collectors' issue.

**Anjali, Delhi**

>> I always felt that while other Outlook publications have evolved over time, *OT* has remained the same. But after reading your September 2008 issue on India's best spas, I have changed my mind. Thank you, Kai Friese and Nayantra Patel, for featuring something I really wanted. After going through the



50 additional spas in your list, I felt a little less envious of those who would be able to afford the Top 10. The articles on Sarawak, Raj Palace, Bekonscot and even the lines by Dave Barry that accompanied 'Traveltoons' have all broken the mould of monotony. Just a suggestion—give some space to humour.

**Deepti, Delhi**

>> This is with reference to your spa special (September 2008). Other than the two buxom ladies on the cover, the issue was not of much use for most readers. Who can afford treatments that cost up to Rs 50,000 a day?

**Rajiv Chopra, Jammu**

>> The September 2008 issue ('Retreat') with its focus on ultra-expensive destinations has come out at a time when even senior bankers, otherwise great spenders in the world of travel, are increasingly staying at company guest houses. Not just that, business class on domestic flights is kind of not on, while overnight trips on the Rajdhani between Mumbai and Delhi are the done thing lately. So can we have some more articles on affordable travel?

**Veeresh Malik, email**

## Letter of the Month

I felt really bad about Amita Baviskar's experience ('Lost Cause', August 2008). Unfortunately travellers can easily become victims of scams. It is a great shame that Ms Baviskar was treated so badly. I feel, however, that all travellers need to be assertive in such situations. Indians should not feel bad about making a scene while travelling abroad in the event of such an unfortunate case of fraud. A Westerner would do the same, especially since the store was at fault as normally, especially in Western countries, when signatures on a credit card do not match, the holder of the card is not legally liable to pay the expenses. It is the responsibility of the store to assure that those signatures match.

**Nitin Chauhan, Himachal Pradesh**

>> I really liked the article 'Lad Bazaar' by Sripama Saha in your September 2008 issue. Being a travel enthusiast, I feel travelling is not just about visiting beaches and mountains. Articles like Sripama's instil in us the essence of travel and help us see places with a new perspective.

**Sayandeep, Kolkata**

>> I really enjoyed Mridula Mohindra's article on Cappadocia ('Thumping Troglodytes') in your August 2008 issue. The photos also did the place justice. I lived in Turkey for six months and Cappadocia was the highlight of my sightseeing trips. However, I would like to say that you should include more budget options for

travellers, and some of the lesser-known sights in other countries. You should also point out the negative aspects of destinations you cover.

**Emily Hansen, Shimla**

>> The articles in *OT* have always provided a pleasurable read ever since the first publication. But what I have also found interesting are the briefs that you include on your contributors. Referring to your classic drives issue in July 2008 (I am a slow reader, at my age), I notice that the Editor has finally got his own back on his nemesis, Akshai Jain, by not including his profile in your section on contributors!

**Sunil Gupta, Mumbai**

## Win!

We're giving a prize for the best letter and you could win a Timex Watch. So write to us at:

**Outlook Traveller,  
AB-10 Safdarjung Enclave,  
New Delhi 110029  
letters@outlooktraveller.com**

Please note that Outlook Traveller will not be held responsible for the return of unsolicited material, including photographs and/or transparencies.





Boats and skyscrapers on the Dubai seafront: yes, Dubai can be pretty

Hi Marco,  
I plan to visit Dubai with my family (my wife and two children over 12) in October or December. Which of these months will be better to travel in? My budget is Rs 2 lakh for a four-night/five-day stay. At hotels, I don't want to pay more than Rs 10,000-12,000 per night for all of us. Can you suggest hotels with family rooms? Will five days be adequate?  
Prof. H.S. Dhanoo

Dear Prof. Dhanoo,  
Given that Dubai city is less than 1,500 sq km and the whole Emirate measures about 4,120 sq km, yes, five days should be more than enough to see Dubai.

For time of year, if your choice is between October and December, I'd say go in **December** when the temperatures are pleasant. Day temperatures hover around 24°C, and nights at

15°C. If shopping is among your priorities—it must be, if you're going to Dubai—consider going in January or February to make your trip coincide with the Dubai Shopping Festival (January 15-February 15, 2009; [www.mysdf.com](http://www.mysdf.com)). The downside, however, is that hotel prices are higher during that period.

There are not very many hotels that match your budget and come with family rooms. You could, however, explore the option of staying in serviced apartments such as **Golden Sands Hotel Apartments** (2BR apt: AED 865/approx Rs 11,000; Al Mankhool Street, Bur Dubai, [www.goldensandsdubai.com](http://www.goldensandsdubai.com)) or **Arabian Dreams Hotel Apartments** (2BR suite: approx AED 760/Rs 9,630; Al Raffa, Dubai, [www.arabian-dreams.com](http://www.arabian-dreams.com)). You tell me your children are over 12 but if they're under 16, it's worth your while to examine offers from **Novotel** (from AED 675/approx Rs 7,500, Zabeel Road, [www.novotel.com](http://www.novotel.com)), which allows

in two children below 16 free of charge. You could also try your luck at **Hotel Four Points by Sheraton** (2BR suite: AED 2,251/approx Rs 28,500; Sheikh Zayed Road, [www.starwoodhotels.com](http://www.starwoodhotels.com)) or **Arjaan Dubai** (2BR suite: AED 2,500/approx Rs 31,750, Al Sufouh Road, [www.rotana.com](http://www.rotana.com)). Yes, the published rates are far higher than the figures you mention, but you could well land a good deal closer to your visit dates.

There is no dearth of things to do in Dubai—there are **desert safaris**, camel racing, creek tours, all manner of entertainment options apart from the shopping and, even, believe it or not, **skiing**. Take a look at [www.dubaicityguide.com](http://www.dubaicityguide.com). Your children in particular are likely to enjoy **Wild Wadi** ([www.wildwadi.com](http://www.wildwadi.com)), a 12-acre amusement park with thrilling rides. A water park in the middle of the desert that uses about 30 million litres of water—that should sum up Dubai for you.



Cruising the Brahmaputra in luxury

SWAPAN KAVAR

Hi Marco,

**A British couple, friends of mine, will be travelling to Kolkata from October 17 to November 1. Since it will be their first visit to India, they are relying on me to make this trip memorable for them. I need your help in chalking out a plan, so they can travel in eastern India and enjoy it. It may not be possible for me to accompany them to all the places they visit.**

Anuj Khandelwal

Dear Anuj,

Your friends have chosen an excellent season to travel in eastern India—the weather will be pleasant and the Puja frenzy will be over. You haven't told me what sort of budget they're on, so I'm just going to assume they want this trip to be special. In West Bengal, Darjeeling should definitely be on the agenda. The **Glenburn Tea Estate** (approx. \$400 on double occupancy; [www.glenburnteastate.com](http://www.glenburnteastate.com)) is the best place to stay. They also organise excellent heritage walks in Calcutta. Your friends will probably want to take in a ride on the World Heritage **Darjeeling toy train** as well. For an entirely different flavour, they should head next to the Sunderbans. Help Tourism's ([www.helptourism.com](http://www.helptourism.com)) **Sunderbans Jungle Camp** is a beacon of eco-tourism. Their 2N/3D all-inclusive package (ex-Calcutta) costs Rs 31,000 for a couple. Help Tourism also organises tea tours in North Bengal. If your friends have the time, they can consider squeezing in an overnight trip to the terracotta temples of **Bishnupur** (132km from Kolkata by train). Although both Orissa and Bihar are extremely rewarding destinations, they are currently grappling with floods, and also unrest in Orissa's case—so they are best avoided at this time. Offer your friends a sam-

pling of our magnificent Northeast instead. The Assam Bengal Navigation Company ([www.assambengalnavigation.com](http://www.assambengalnavigation.com)) runs luxurious weeklong **cruises on the Brahmaputra** in Assam. It may be too late to book a ride at such short notice but do check. Or just check into the same company's **Diphlu River Lodge**, in Kaziranga National Park, refuge of the one-horned rhino. Shillong, the easily accessible capital of Meghalaya, can be tagged on to any Assam visit. It now boasts a plush new resort on its outskirts, **Ri Kynjai** (<http://rikyinjai.com>).

Dear Marco,

**We are planning to visit some places in Gujarat in December. This is our week-long itinerary: Day 1: Arrive Ahmedabad. Day 2: City sightseeing. Day 3: Visit Modhera, Patan and leave for Dwarka by night train or bus. Day 4: Dwarka and Bet Dwarka sightseeing. Day 5: Veraval/Chorwad and Somnath. Day 6: Leisure. Day 7: Return to Ahmedabad.**

**My questions:**

1. Is a week adequate for this itinerary or do we need another day?
2. Which centrally located, three-star hotels in Ahmedabad, as well as accommodation in Dwarka, can you suggest?
3. To visit Somnath, where would you advise us to stay—in Veraval or Chorwad?
4. For the Ahmedabad-Dwarka leg, should we take a bus or go by train?
5. Will we need woollens?

Raj

Dear Raj,

1. Seven days spread across eastern Gujarat, the Jamnagar region and the southern Saurashtra coast—you're planning to cover

quite some distance. The journeys (particularly the Ahmedabad-Dwarka leg) may be sapping but if you and your companions are energetic, your itinerary should be doable.

2. Ahmedabad has several centrally located, three-star hotels. Try **Ritz Inn** on Station Road (from Rs 1,800; 079-221 23842, [www.hotelritzinn.com](http://www.hotelritzinn.com)) or **Hotel Volga** (from Rs 700; 25509497). In Dwarka, try **Hotel Dwarka Residency** (from Rs 1,000; near Iskon Gate, 02892-2 36032), **Hotel City Palace** (from Rs 500, Teen Batti Chowk, 234 31 2, [www.hotelcitypalacedwarka.com](http://www.hotelcitypalacedwarka.com)) or **Hotel Darshan** (from Rs 750, Jawahar Road, 235034).
3. Veraval is more convenient, being closer to the temple as well as offering a greater choice of stay options. There is a clutch of value-for-money options even within the temple town. Try **Safari Hotel** (from Rs 600; Kodinar Road, 02876-232355).
4. To get from Ahmedabad to Dwarka (457km), if you want to stick to the itinerary you've drawn up and travel by night, I'm afraid it will have to be by bus. The only train that runs daily is the Saurashtra Mail, which leaves Ahmedabad at 5.30am and arrives in Dwarka at 3.10pm—almost a full day lost. Direct state transport buses run from the bus stand at Gita Mandir but the journeys are circuitous and not very comfortable. The best thing to do is to take a private bus from Paldi upto Jamnagar (300km) and then another bus to Dwarka (137km) from there.
5. Gujarat has mild winters with an average maximum of 29°C and minimum around 12°C, so I'd say carry **light woollens**.

*Travel confusion?*

Email [mpolo@outlookindia.com](mailto:mpolo@outlookindia.com).

Please note that Marco will reply to selected queries only in the magazine.

# northsoutheastw

N  
S  
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Calcutta's legendary trams have just undergone a makeover



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 38 JUST BACK Singapore flyer  
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Edited by AMIT DIXIT



Photograph by SANDIPAN CHAT TERJE

## Street Cred

The epitaph of the Calcutta tram has been written many, many times. Detractors may as well give up. Calcutta is the only Indian city to have held on to this gracious, non-polluting mode of transport, although, over the years, the network has shrunk and the trams gone rickety.

It was in Switzerland that West Bengal transport minister Subhas Chakraborty apparently had his epiphany—he wanted Swiss trams for his beloved city. As importing the trams was prohibitively expensive, the Calcutta Transport Corporation did the next best thing—it simply developed them at home. Featuring no technological improvements, and built at a cost of Rs 11.5 lakh each at the Nonapukur depot, these swanky new trams concentrate on improving passenger comfort. They're slimmer and feature large glass windows. On the inside, the bucket seats with cushions, replacing the wooden seats, are gentler on the posterior. There are more fans, power backup and a single class of travel. Two trams have rolled out while two more are under construction (10 more have been sanctioned). The trams will travel at a leisurely 40km/hr. At a minimum fare of Rs 4, it's a joyride and everyone's invited.

## Souvenir

There is nothing more bizarre or puzzling than the world of the coral reef. From the air the coral reefs of the Maldives look like rings of light green bubbling up from a vast sheet of deep blue. They're even more dramatic when you get into the water. One moment all you can see beneath you is deep dark endless ocean, and then suddenly the seabed seems to rise and burst into a million colours. Electric blue, bright yellow, red and black miniature fish swim purposefully in between thickets of coral. Some swim slowly like elaborately coiffured stately old ladies, while others strut about like pompous young men. It's almost impossible to capture the beauty of this little world in prose, so I've settled for this **anemone fish fridge magnet** (US \$4), which I picked up at a duty-free shop at Male' airport.

Akshai Jain



SHASHWAT SAXENA

## THE GUIDE

Her background as a student of Hindu philosophy and Buddhist thinking, and her deep, abiding love of India gives Peggy Holroyde the right to write a book called *An ABC of Indian Culture*. She expounds on nearly 400 concepts relating to the country. She succeeds, as far as anybody is able, to put down the nebulous nature of ideas such as Abhayam, Advaita and Sanatana Dharma. The glossary is not only about Sacred India, however—Holroyde includes the Sari and

This is a new kind of guidebook you would not have seen a decade ago, when Lonely Planet ruled the world. But this is the age of the well-heeled traveller



Indian Ocean Chic  
Joe Yogerst  
Penguin Books India  
Rs 795/192pp

(roughing it out is so 1990s). And so, destinations, luxury resorts and activities blend seamlessly in this guide to all that is stylish, upmarket and expensive in the Indian Ocean. The islands of the Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Sri Lanka and Zanzibar make the grade. (Note that Indian islands are not deemed chic enough.) And when 'budget' is not an area of investigation, the writer has an easier job on his hands as well. The writing is light but informed. The images are smart if a bit plastic. But the overall result is a prettier, pleasing guidebook, which is not a chore to flip through.



An ABC of Indian Culture  
Peggy Holroyde  
Mapinlit  
Rs 595/378pp

the Mughals along with Beggars and Five Year Plans—although the spiritual slant is unmistakable.

Cluttered and involved though it sometimes may be, this is an intelligent collection of impressions that introduces India to anyone who cares to look beyond the clichés.

## SITESEEING

[www.vegetarian-vacations.com](http://www.vegetarian-vacations.com)  
[www.vegding.com](http://www.vegding.com)

For a large number of Indians, vegetarianism is a matter of religious belief. Which, at one time, meant that dining abroad was fraught with bad karma opportunities, and so, to be safe, many of these folks did their travelling fuelled by salads and bread rolls. Then, smart Indian travel operators started building package tours where a cook travelled along. Some folks consider this less than optimum; what's travel without sampling the local cuisine?

## ONLINE GUIDES FOR THE TRAVELLING VEGETARIAN

Which leads to a nice niche for the first site listed, which lists veggie-friendly or 100% vegetarian options that aren't just about the spas and health farms. You get all sorts here: B&Bs, adventure sports, cruises and even cooking holidays. If you prefer to make your own arrangements, try the second site, which lets you find veggie restaurants and shops all over the world. Both sites rely on user contributions, so you're likely to find destinations popular with the average US tourist. But until some smart desi does a clone, they make a good start.

Peter Griffin

## AVIATION



## Bye-Bye, Deccan

The airline which brought flying to the 'common man' is no more. Air Deccan, which was acquired by Kingfisher Airlines about a year ago, has been re-branded and will now be known as Kingfisher Red. The airline will operate under the Kingfisher flight code IT, and tickets will be booked on the Kingfisher website. Passengers will be able to accumulate King miles, and will have access to Kingfisher lounges. The number of Deccan flights have already been reduced, but Kingfisher promises that the low fares will remain. Air Deccan, R.I.P.

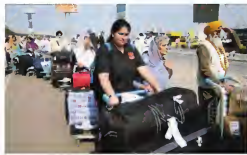
## Going Green

Indian aviation is finally becoming environmentally conscious, and getting awards for it too. The new Rajiv Gandhi International Airport (RGIA) at Hyderabad has been given the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Silver Rating by the US Green Building Council. It's the first airport in Asia to get the rating, and one of just three in the world. Green features in the airport help it save 25 per cent in energy costs and over 30 per cent in water (compared to other airports of the same size). Almost

simultaneously, Delhi International Airport Limited (DIAL) has won the Greentech Gold Award for Environmental Excellence in the Aviation Sector 2008 for its efforts in 'pollution prevention and innovative use of new technologies in environmental management'. The 'greening' is also happening on the software front—Galileo, a management software for the travel industry, now incorporates the Travelport Carbon Tracker which will allow companies and individuals to calculate the carbon footprint of their travel and choose routes and modes that are the least polluting.

## Punjab da Plane

So what happens when an airline pulls out from a route? If it happens to be pulling out from the Amritsar to Birmingham route, the answer is pretty straightforward—you simply start another airline. Bilga Air, named after a village in 'The Punjab', is going to start flying towards the end of October. No prizes for guessing the route: Amritsar-Birmingham-Toronto.



## watch this space

> **Jet Airways** to start flights from Bangalore to New York and Toronto from October 31. Also starts daily direct flights from Thiruvananthapuram to Muscat. Daily flights also from Hyderabad to Visakhapatnam, Goa and Pune; and daily flights on the Pune-Bangalore sector. See [www.jetairways.com](http://www.jetairways.com)

> **SpiceJet** adds new flights from Delhi to Chennai, Hyderabad, Coimbatore, Kolkata and Goa. Also introduces new flights on the Chennai-Pune, Coimbatore-Chennai, Hyderabad-Coimbatore and Mumbai-Chennai sectors. See [www.spicejet.com](http://www.spicejet.com)

> **Paramount Airways** introduces flights between Chennai and Ahmedabad. See [www.paramountairways.com](http://www.paramountairways.com)

> **IndiGo** introduces flights between Pune and Chennai. Also starts additional flights on the Chennai-Kolkata and Kolkata-Pune sectors. See [www.goindigo.in](http://www.goindigo.in)

> **British Airways** introduces special festive fares (till October 13) from Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai and Bangalore to London. [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)

> **SAS** to start flights from Copenhagen to Delhi from October 27. See [www.flysos.com](http://www.flysos.com)

> **Air Arabia** introduces daily flights from Sharjah to Hyderabad starting October 27. See [www.oiorbio.com](http://www.oiorbio.com)

> **United Airways** of Bangladesh starts flights from Kolkata to Dhaka. See [www.uobdl.com](http://www.uobdl.com)

## AVIATION

## Next Flight

The best airfares in the sky this month

**C**airo, Rs 26,000 on Gulf Air. Route: Delhi-Bahrain-Cairo, [www.gulfair.com](http://www.gulfair.com). Winter is the best time to go to Cairo—the weather is good, the skies are clear and the fares are reasonable.

**I**stanbul, Rs 23,000 on Air Arabia. Route: Mumbai-Sharjah-Istanbul, [www.airarabia.com](http://www.airarabia.com)

**M**anila, Rs 25,000 on Tiger Airways. Route: Chennai-Singapore-Manila, [www.tigerairways.com](http://www.tigerairways.com). This South-east Asian low-cost airline flies to a large number of international destinations. They don't offer connecting flights—you'll have to check in at Chennai and again at Singapore, but for the price the hassle is worth it.

**B**udapest, Rs 40,000 on Finnair. Route: Mumbai-Helsinki-Budapest, [www.finnair.com](http://www.finnair.com). Includes a free stopover in Helsinki.

**K**uala Lumpur, Rs 21,000 on Malaysia Airlines. Route: Delhi-Kuala Lumpur, [www.malaysiaairlines.com](http://www.malaysiaairlines.com)

**S**harjah, Rs 16,000 on Air Arabia. Route: Hyderabad-Sharjah, [www.airarabia.com](http://www.airarabia.com).

*All fares are economy return, inclusive of taxes, available directly from the airlines.*

## Fare Pick



**L**ondon, Rs 31,000 on Emirates. Route: Bangalore-Dubai-London, [www.emirates.com](http://www.emirates.com). Kingfisher has sparked off a fare war with the introduction of its Bangalore-London flights. Other airlines have followed suit—British Airways has dropped fares to Rs 9,900 (what they don't tell you are that taxes are about Rs 23,000), and Virgin and Air India have also reduced fares.





## FESTIVAL



## Listen to the Whole World at WOMAD

In 1982, Peter Gabriel—who was doing a lot more than just making those catchy Sledgehammer music videos—and a bunch of committed folks crossed their fingers and started WOMAD (World Of Music And Dance) in an effort to expose mainstream audiences to indigenous and folk sounds from around the world. Twenty-six years later, the festival has grown commendably in size (it's now one of the largest in the UK) and multiplied in location: staggered throughout

the year are WOMADs in over 20 countries, including Spain, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Italy.

A train ride from London and a short hike through grassy fields landed my rucksack and I at this year's flagship festival in rural Charlton Park. At the campground, I staked out a piece of turf to call home for the next three days, away from the Port-a-Potties and rowdier campers. Pegs hammered, rain-resistant flysheets secured and neighbourly



relations established, I cracked a beer and ambled off to explore the World of Music and Dance.

In the tree-laden Arboretum, therapists touted everything from acupuncture and reiki to hot-stone foot massages and 'gong healing', chequered tablecloths welcomed weary tent-pitchers at the cheery Tea Garden and kids constructed musical instruments in the Woodland Gamelan. Ahead, the main arena housed a vast, colourful array of craft and food traders, an old-fashioned steam fair, overpriced bars, four massive sound stages and dance and drum workshop tents, all punctuated with signature WOMAD flags snapping in the wind.

The moment Zimbabwean vocalist group



Clockwise from above: Rachid Taha performs at the festival; WOMAD signpost; balloons for sale; performers scheduled for the day

Siyaya got the party started with their bright costumes and energetic dancing. I knew I was in love. I dashed from the Open Air stage to the Siam tent, from African drum workshops to Flying Things and Funny Hats stalls, pausing periodically for liquid sustenance, organic udon and donuts. I grooved to reggae by old-guard Jamaican Ernest Ranglin and new-guard UK master Finley Quayle. I watched drunken Algerian rebel-rocker Rachid Taha smoking Gitanes

and swigging whisky on stage, and shimmied to the Egyptian rhythms of Hamid Baroudi. I marched to the beat of 20 samba drummers, was brought to my knees by Bassekou Kouyate's traditional Mali blues, alternately wept and jiggled to the melodic tales of Norwegian-Scottish Fribo and marvelled at the fan-wielding kung-fu monks. I heard French-Occitane acapella singing, Kiwi breakbeat, an all-women, all-powerful Japanese drumming troupe and African and

Latin sounds up the wahoo.

It all ended too soon, but not before I'd become a die-hard fan of a dozen artists whose names I'd never heard before, whom I'd babble excitedly about on a first-name basis to the blank stares of friends back home. That's the power of live music. That's the beauty of WOMAD.

—Rayna Jhaveri

(The next WOMAD is from November 6 to 9, at the beachside city of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, in Spain. See [www.womad.org](http://www.womad.org) for more details.)

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# Fellow Traveller



S U S H A M A R E D D Y

Model and TV Anchor

**Do you travel a lot?** I love travelling. I have been to almost every corner of the globe, except Central Africa and South America, and I would love to travel to those parts as well.

**Recent holiday?** I visited the Turks and Caicos Islands in the Caribbean and Costa Rica. It was a beautiful holiday.

**What is your holiday style?** I started out as a backpacker but now prefer eco-luxury. I generally stay at resorts that, although luxurious, are understated. These hotels are small, intimate and use locally sourced materials. On my recent trip to Costa Rica, I went on a river rafting expedition. I stayed at the Pacuare Jungle Lodge on the Pacuare River, one of the best white-water rafting destinations in the world, and we rafted down the lodge. The lodge has just a handful of villas and the location is stunning and we had to raft out of the lodge through a Grade IV rapid. Simply brilliant!

**Favourite holiday?** I have been all over the world, but my favourite destination is our very own Sikkim. I had the time of my life there.

**Dream destinations?** I want to travel to the poles or to some place close to the poles. Greenland in the northern hemisphere and Patagonia in the south fit the bill quite well.

**What will one always find in your travel bag?** I am a light traveller. I carry my mobile, charger, iPod and medicines apart from clothes and shoes. I am a practical traveller.

**Tell us about the new show you are anchoring on Discovery Travel & Living.** The show is called *Dream Hotels*. It features some of the best hotels from across the world. Each of the featured hotels is unique in some respect.

**Your favourite hotel?** My favourite hotel is the One&Only Reethi Rah Resort located in the North Male' Atoll in the Maldives. It has beautiful villas built into the sea.



AFP

Radhika P. Nair

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## Hotel Confidential



The Taj Mahal Palace and Towers, located at the tip of a thin finger of land that dips into the Arabian Sea, may be a Mumbai landmark; it may even be as well-recognised as its neighbour, the Gateway of India—but a whole series devoted to the workings of its innards may be too much of a good thing. Starting October 26 on Discovery Travel & Living is a reality series called *Hotel by the Bay*—11 episodes in all will air Sundays at 8.30pm that deal with the minutiae of action behind the scenes, of what it takes to keep a hotel like this oiled and creak-free. The sort of thing that will appeal to those who like that sort of thing.



PRASHANTPANJARI



## The Big Hill Festival

They call it the festive season, and so it is, but for more than the usual reasons. It's the time for artsy-craftsy festivals to start unfurling their banners all across the cooling plains. But Dehradun's Virasat is still special. The 15-day mega festival, to be held this year between October 11 and 15, is an attempt by REACH (Rural Entrepreneurship for Art & Cultural Heritage) to bring artists and the masses together. Over 100 separate events will see the participation of some 6,000 artists from across India and elsewhere. The programmes, which will be staged at several venues, encompass folk theatre, dance and music, contemporary and fusion performing arts, classical music and dance, workshops, literary activities and film screenings. L. Subramaniam, Kavita Krishnamurthy, Shiv Kumar Sharma, Vishwa Mohan Bhatt, the Langa Manganiars of Rajasthan, Rashid Khan, Shovana Narayan, Kiran Segal, Bharati Shivaji and Daler Mehndi (who will sing traditional Sufi songs, not Punjabi pop) are among the stars to look out for. But art is not restricted to performance and the organisers recognise that—about 400 artisans will display and sell their crafts directly to visitors. All performances are free. For schedules and more details, see [www.virasat.com](http://www.virasat.com).

## Literature on the Beach

Jaipur may be the star of the lit-fest scene, but now a modest beginning is being made in Kerala with the Kovalam Literary Festival (Oct 6-8, Taj Green Cove resort). Okay, maybe not so modest, because the names are big: biographer and historian Patrick French, Shashi Tharoor, Gulzar, Aravind Adiga, Tarun Tejpal and Shobaa De as well as lit-fest regulars William Dalrymple and Tishani Doshi. Malayalam will be represented by legends M.T. Vasudevan Nair, M. Mukundan, K. Satchidanandan and Zachariah. Idyllic Kovalam will ring to debates on 'Writing in a Global World' and evaluate the worth of chick-lit. Now that's a beach party you shouldn't be shy to attend.





## TRADE WINDS

By Prem Subramaniam

## Chasing the Monsoon

Brian Blake, a New Zealand-based photographer, managed to capture the essence of the Indian monsoon while photographing a 14-year-old Aparna Sen when she was filming for Satyajit Ray's *Sompti* in 1961. The photograph, captioned 'Monsoon Girl', was splashed across *Life*, *Paris Match*, *Epoch* and *Queen*. While the West views the rains as a spoilsport, we in India regard it as the end of a torrid summer, and our literature evokes the sensuous aspects of the monsoon immortalised by Kalidas's *Meghdoot*. It was, therefore, appropriate that Madhya Pradesh Tourism was the principal sponsor of the CII-organised 'Monsoon Tourism' seminar in September. CII Rajasthan shared details of their endeavour to promote Jaipur by Nite coinciding with Teej. Kerala has successfully promoted the monsoon as the best time for Ayurvedic therapies while Uttarakhand's focus was more on responding to safety requirements arising out of landslides and associated roadblocks. Adequate attention wasn't paid to other aspects of the monsoon beyond leisure tourism and the audience consisted mainly of students. Bureaucrats left shortly after their presentations, strengthening the view that they make poor listeners.

## Retreat

The World Tourism and Travel Council's India Chapter had a retreat at Khajuraho for an audience consisting of bureaucrats and ex-bureaucrats, a few parliamentarians, ministers, filmmakers and the movers and shakers of the hotel, aviation and tourism sectors. For the secretary general of the India



ATUL LOVE

Chapter, Rathi Vinay Jha, this marked a return to tourism after a stint at the Fashion and Design Council of India and along with Geeta Bhatia of the Bird Group and Jyotsna Suri of Bharat Hotels, the three ladies handled the proceedings with consummate ease, ably supported by Noni Chawla's role as moderator. Jean-Paul Baumgarten, who looks after the affairs of the WTTC from London, was like a genial Dumbledore, but minus any magic potions.

Khajuraho is now home to over 40 Japanese girls married into the local communities. A former shopkeeper now runs the Ramada hotel and also operates shops at six major international European airports. The sleepy town is undergoing a metamorphosis.

## Road Less Travelled

Pankaj Wadhwa has been working towards making Kumaon his primary home after having sold off his event management company Kidstuff to Mudra. Having successfully convinced 22 NGOs operating in the region to try and work in consonance wherever possible, he has aggregated produce from Kumaon to create a set of gift hampers which range in price from a low of Rs 100 for two bottles of jam to about Rs 500 for a selection of honey, jams, pickles, herbs, apricot oil, soap and scrubs. Using his past connections with corporates, he is busy securing bulk orders for the festive season.

Ravi Kumar quit his job with a large biscuit company and moved to the Nilgiris with his family. He has set up a suc-

cessful homestay programme at Kotagiri marketed as Misty Heights. Kumar prefers clients from Europe as they are sensitive to the difference between a hotel and a homestay.

## ITB-Asia

ITB will be making its first foray into Asia with their travel trade event at Singapore in October. Stakeholders in Indian tourism have a tough task ahead of them as they try and restore confidence in the destination following the series of terrorist incidents in major cities, the Bihar floods and the Tata spat in Bengal. The comfort of the last four years will soon seem like a distant dream. How adequately we are equipped to address the concerns of future travellers will come up for sharp scrutiny.

## JUST BACK



AFP

## High Flying to Singapore

Being an aviation correspondent isn't easy. It's made more difficult by the fact that when I'm off the job I'd have to save for a couple of months to buy international coach class tickets, while on the job I'm expected to judge different first-class menus, evaluate business-class seats across airlines, and pretend to be a connoisseur of vintage wines.

On the flip side though, I get a behind-the-scenes look at the airline business. It's an immensely demanding, precise and competitive business—something you only truly realise and appreciate when you visit a flight kitchen, or talk to an airline manager.

So in the line of duty I recently flew down to Singapore. Singapore Airlines was bringing its latest cabin products to India on board their Boeing 777-300ER, and they were keen on showing them to a group of journalists.

We were, of course, flying business class. I spent the first hour of the late-night flight examining the surroundings. The 30-inch wide plush leather seats could have seated three people, storage areas for magazines and personal odds and ends were built into various corners of the seats, the large adjustable table made a comfortable workstation, and a vanity mirror was placed beside the 15.4-inch screen, so that you didn't have to make that extra trip to the bathroom.

Five hours later we were in Singapore. It

was time for a short tour of Terminal 3, the latest addition to the Changi airport. If it weren't for the strong air-conditioning it could have passed off for a tropical garden—a huge vertical sheet of green shrubs rose up to the ceiling. The duty-free area was the size of a mall, and quite unusually, most of the airport was carpeted.

Next, we moved on to the Singapore Airport Terminal Services (SATS) Inflight Catering Centre (SICC). A board at the entrance gave statistics for June 2008: "SATS produced 21,57,098 meals with a cargo tonnage of 1,32,425." Huge trucks deposited raw material (everything from Caspian caviar to fruits and vegetables) at SICC 1—the receiving base, where the material was re-sorted and repackaged. A complicated mechanised system then transported it to either the storage area or to SICC 2, the cooking and repackaging centre, where another incredibly elaborate set of procedures kicked in, transporting the right ingredients to the right industrial-size kitchen (first class, Indian, Japanese, Muslim, etc.).

"It doesn't end there," said Brian Yeap, who was showing us around SICC. "We've got a Simulator Aircraft Cabin at SICC which simulates a aircraft cabin at 36,000ft. That's where we do our food tasting. Food can taste very different in a pressurised cabin at that height. It takes the simulator 20 minutes to reach that height, and the same amount of time to descend!"

Later in the day we made a trip to the SIA



Clockwise from left: cabin crew at the Changi airport; Boeing 777-300ER; business-class cabin; first-class in-flight meal

Training Centre—the source of the eponymous Singapore Girl, and the place where all Singapore Airlines staff is trained. There we spoke to senior management about the airline's expansion plans, their efforts to reduce weight by creating new composite materials for plates, the differences between their approach and that of other competitor airlines (why, for example, they don't have massage functions on their business class seats), etc.

Finally, at the end of a very long day, we went to that giant observation wheel—the Singapore Flyer, for a bit of sightseeing. The next morning we were back on a flight to Delhi. We were flying business class—where you have three windows instead of one to look out, where the food is fantastic and the entertainment even better—but I was fast asleep before the plane had even left the ground.

Akshai Jain

# Calendar OCTOBER

N S E W

where to be, when and why



## OCT 10-19 BUDAPEST AUTUMN FESTIVAL

The Autumn Festival promotes some of the best performances in contemporary art. The event encompasses dance, theatre, jazz and films. But many of the performances on the festival agenda are unclassifiable—they mix techniques and media to create a unique experience for the audience. See [www.boj.hu](http://www.boj.hu)



## OCT 17-19 VINTAGE POSTER FAIR, NEW YORK

Vintage poster enthusiasts are in for a treat this October. On these dates, some of the best-known dealers and auctioneers of vintage posters will exhibit more than 10,000 posters in New York. Posters dating from the 19th century will be up for grabs. See [www.posterfair.com](http://www.posterfair.com)

## OCT 4 KAIKOURA SEAFEST, NEW ZEALAND

The seafest is one of the many reasons to visit Middle Earth. At the festival in Kaikoura, on New Zealand's East Coast, visitors can eat some of the tastiest samples from the ocean, along with a wide variety of 'landfood', including emu and ostrich. See [www.seafest.co.nz](http://www.seafest.co.nz)

## OCT 2-19 FESTIVAL VAL-DE-MARNE, PARIS



Most tourists are so enamoured of the city of Paris that they miss out on some of the happening suburbs of the city. This festival is held in the commune of Ivry-sur-Seine, in the department of Val-de-Marne. Ivry-sur-Seine is essentially an industrial suburb but it also has a dynamic residential area, which comes alive on these dates. Acrobats, magicians, jugglers and comedians entertain the crowds. It's also a good place to listen to local bands. See [www.festivaldemorne.org](http://www.festivaldemorne.org)



## OCT 24-26 LAN KWAI FONG STREET CARNIVAL

Lan Kwai Fong is the street to go to for the best food and drink in Hong Kong. During the carnival (above) the street gets even livelier with stalls selling everything from food and beer to tattoos and clothes. Magicians, drummers and samba performers will be at hand to entertain the crowds. See [www.discoverhongkong.com](http://www.discoverhongkong.com)



## OCT 11 SCARECROW FESTIVAL, BRUSSELS

One would expect to see scarecrows in farms, but during this festival these creations of straw and rags take over the central square of Brussels. Organised by the Lion's Club to raise money, participants are allowed to let their creativity run wild. See [www.belgium-tourism.be](http://www.belgium-tourism.be)

## OCT 9 BALLROOM DANCING CHAMPIONSHIP

Around 360 of the best amateur and professional dancers from around the world take the stage during this event. The venue is London's historic Royal Albert Hall. Competition will be in the standard and Latin categories. See [www.dance-news.co.uk](http://www.dance-news.co.uk)





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: CALVE  
TAMIL HERITAGE

Clockwise from above: a wrought-iron balcony; the façade of Calve with its thalavaram; and the restaurant

It's as unexpected an address as any for a swish heritage property in a town rich with Gallic charms. Just opposite the home-cum-clinic of Dr B. Rajalakshmi Sakthivel, B.S.M.S., Siddha Physician, one door away from the diffident Soucilabai Government Girls Higher Secondary School, the mansion on Old Number 36, Vysial Street, stands honourably tall. There is no sweeping boulevard, promenade or beachfront to recommend WelcomHeritage's Calve but there is, instead, a rare streetscape of traditional continuous verandahs (*thalavarams* and *thinna's*), inviting idyllic descriptions of even hazy summer afternoons. The exquisitely restored 150-year-old edifice was once the residence of Telugu-speaking Chettiaris who gave its street the French name of Rue Calve Subbraya Chetty. Yet, despite its proximity to nearly everything, this part of Pondicherry is, such a pity, easily missed.

"When I was a small boy," says Ashok Panda of INTACH, Pondicherry, "I would walk home from school under the thalavarams of houses one after the other, till the end of whole streets, and not once leave their shade." Today, he would have to leap over vehicles and street vendors to keep to anything resembling a straight line, except in Calve's corner of the world. The owners of about 20 houses on Rue Calve benefitted from a European Commission-funded Model Street Restoration Project by INTACH, which meticulously brought back old façades. Note that even the mansion of Ananda Rangapillai, legendary dubash of the Compagnie, famous for its Franco-Tamil styling, has been partly torn down.

"As the building had been leased to a bank for years, you can imagine what it looked like," says Auroville-based architect Dharmesh Jadeja, who worked on restoring Calve to its original glory. Jadeja has relied on extensive wood panelling, antique furniture, Chettinad lime-and-egg-white plastering and hand-made Athangudi tiles to "not make it [Calve] 'designer'". The experience also led to the AinA (Artisans in Architecture) project, which works to "create a respectable space for artisans in contemporary Indian architecture."

The high Madras-roof ceilings, wide corridors and sunny courtyard at Calve are set off superbly by grand columns, stained-glass door arches, slatted windows and wrought-iron balconies. While duplex rooms







Rooms at Calve are distinguished by high ceilings, stained glass and old tiled floors

have a curved wooden staircase leading to a bedroom on the upper level, the suites have private balconies and gleaming copper bathtubs. Elsewhere, an uneven oxide finish lends unusual and pleasing colours to generous built-in bathtubs. The flatware is stone pottery designed by Jadeja's wife Rakhee Kane.

If you are the sort of person who draws a firm line at door-less loos, bathrooms behind half-walls and rooms in attics in the name of heritage accommodation, then be

assured that Calve makes no demand of its guests more strenuous than climbing a flight or two of stairs. But there is no lift and only one room on the ground floor, so ask ahead if such be your need. The mod-cons are plentiful and, at worst, you may have to go on all-fours across a bed to access the pretty, old-fashioned ceramic-backed switches, wait a full five minutes for the rather timid shower to turn hot, or use the fridge-cum-locker cabinet to hook up your laptop (the desk was gorgeously

regal but no plug-point dared near it).

The restaurant, Salle a Manger, has friendly staff and an extensive menu of French, Italian and Mughlai food, with Thai and Chinese staples sneaking in as well. But American and Continental fare apart, only idli and dosai made it to the breakfast table. Seafood is well represented. The Veerampattinam Meen Kozhambu—fish cooked the way a Paandi fisherman would like it—is a Calve speciality. Ten intriguing Creole recipes—such as an Avarikai Salad featuring country beans, diced eggs, onions and coconut milk—speak well of the chef's good intentions.



Calve shares Pondicherry's robust survival instincts. The colonial history of what was but a minuscule port on the Indo-China sea route has been a rocky see-saw of French-Dutch-French-Brit-French-Brit-French (really!) rule. Lovably, Pondy still remains a resolutely laidback toss-up of French and Tamil traditions, just right for its recent years of assiduously promoted tourism. Perhaps as a consequence of these quirky destinies, fine hotels and dining are more affordable here than, say, Kerala (okay, union territory taxes are low, too). Calve is an elegant reiteration of this revival, and the first upmarket example of its kind in the largely tourist-neglected Tamil Quarter.

Vaidehi Iyer

#### THE INFORMATION

**LOCATION** Old No 36, New No 44, Vysial Street, Puducherry 605001 (3hr30min drive from Chennai airport; 36km from nearest railhead, Villupuram)

**ACCOMMODATION** 5 executive rooms, 2 duplex rooms, 3 suites

**TARIFF** Rs 3,555 (executive), Rs 4,355 (duplex), Rs 5,355 (suites). Bed tea/coffee and breakfast included; no luxury taxes here!

**CONTACT** 0413-2223738/4103, [www.calve.in](http://www.calve.in), [www.welcomheritagehotels.com](http://www.welcomheritagehotels.com)



## CHECK OUT KURUMBA BECALMED

How would you spend your time if you lived on an island a few hundred feet wide and about as long, with few other creatures and many coconut trees? Well, you could start naming things. But since there aren't all that many things around to name, you'd have to invent categories and create subtle distinctions. Like 'Kurumba', which refers to one of about 20 different stages in the developmental cycle of the

coconut—the stage at which the coconut's water is sweetest and freshest.

And once you were done naming everything? If you were in the Maldives, where there is precious little to do, you'd fill your island with the sweetest things you could find—speedy yachts, pretty women, fine food and drink, luxurious rooms, spas and sea-planes—and you'd call it Kurumba.

The Kurumba Maldives resort peeks out from a small coral island. From a distance you can't see any land, only a fringe of coconut trees rising from the brilliant blue

ocean. But as our massive yacht shoots across the water, a ring of white sand appears around the island and the red tile roofs of hundreds of little cottages emerge between and under the coconut trees.

On first impression it's all a little surreal, picture-postcard perfect. The waters are too blue, the baby sharks and reef fish a little too clearly visible, the coconut trees in just the right places, the breeze warm but gentle, the lush manicured tropical vegetation sprinkled with brilliant bougainvillea



Clockwise from this picture:  
beach-facing cottages;  
interiors of a private villa;  
the Beach Bar terrace seen  
from the water; a four-poster  
bed in the interiors of a  
pool villa; and the resort  
seen from a distance



flowers, golf carts moving along paved paths transporting guests who don't want to walk, and everyone smiling.

The Kurumba management had decided that what I needed most after an unrealistically long flight (Delhi to Bangalore to Colombo to Malé) was a massage. Gentle music and the sound of flowing water rippled through the spa. Mediterranean white walls, massive glass façades with white curtains and pathways over pools of water created an intense calm. I chose the Thai massage, and in my sleep-deprived state,



submitted all too readily to the expert hands of my masseur.

That evening we went out on a 'sunset cruise'. As the yacht picked up speed, the breeze on the front deck turned into a gale. Half an hour into the ride, a school of dolphins joined us. They swam in front of the yacht and under it. Then a dolphin jumped right out of the water, and did a twirl. Another one joined it, and then another—till a line of dolphins twirled above the water

like mermaid ballerinas 50 feet away from us. And then as suddenly as they'd appeared they left. The sun had sunk to the horizon, turning the sky a brilliant

red and gold. The champagne was brought out, and the boat headed back.

Doing nothing is one of the definite pleasures of being on Kurumba. That's exactly what I decided to do the next morning. The semi-open air bathrooms with their small plunge pools and jacuzzis are a good place to start. And then, you should make your way to the beach. The sparkling white sand gives way to the clearest blue





The Beach Bar at night (top); and the lavish Royal Kurumba Residence

water you'll ever see. I dragged out a deck chair, and sat reading above the waters, while brilliantly coloured fish floated below me.

I saw many more fish when I went snorkelling mid-ocean later in the day. Forty minutes out to sea, like Alice floating down the well, I fell into a world of busybody reef fish. Butterfly fish, angel fish, lizard fish, trumpet fish emerged from every corner, darting from purple coral to yellow coral to red coral. Where the coral ended the ocean floor dropped straight down into inky blackness. A giant turtle swam serenely along the edge.

At night the ocean falls silent, and the lights of Malé and the other islands glimmer in the darkness. Candles cast shadows on tables laid out on the open wooden deck at the Ocean Grill restaurant on Kurumba—one of eight fine-dining restau-

rants. At the Beach Bar a local band is playing the Beatles. Snatches of conversation rise from the tables around me. The sky is clear and lit with stars. I carve up a juicy tenderloin steak, take a sip of red wine, and then pinch myself. It still does not feel real.

Akshai Jain

#### THE INFORMATION

**LOCATION** Kurumba Maldives is located 2km/10min by boat from Malé airport.

**ACCOMMODATION** 38 superior rooms; 39 deluxe rooms; 74 deluxe bungalows; 6 private villas; 10 garden villas; 8 pool villas; 4 presidential suites; 1 royal Kurumba residence

**TARIFF** \$280-\$1,975

**CONTACT** +960-3332200, [www.kurumba.com](http://www.kurumba.com)

watch this  
space



> Choice Hospitality, an American hotel company that runs a brand of budget hotels across the world called Comfort Inn, opens its first managed outlet in Delhi. **Comfort Inn The President** is the new avatar of Hotel Landmark President, located in the city centre—on Asaf Ali Road, near Delhi Gate and within striking distance of Connaught Place. Each of the 19 rooms at the hotel feature standard facilities for business travellers, including a mini-bar, LCD television and wi-fi connectivity. The hotel has one multi-cuisine restaurant. **Tariff:** Rs 6,500 (single)/ Rs 7,000 (double). **Contact:** 1800-11-7117, [www.choicehotelsindia.com](http://www.choicehotelsindia.com)

> Taj Hotels launches its newest business hotel, the **Taj Residency Trivandrum**. The 137-room property offers a range of accommodation, including deluxe, superior and premium rooms as well as two types of suites. Facilities for the business traveller include a capacious boardroom, a 4,500 sq ft banquet hall, eight-seater meeting room, a business centre and pool-side lawns as a venue for events. There's a range of dining options, including a lounge bar, an all-day café and a deli. A Chinese speciality restaurant and the Taj Jiva spa will also be operational soon. **Tariff:** Rs 4,400-11,500. **Contact:** 0471-6612345, [www.tajhotels.com](http://www.tajhotels.com)





## NEW HOTELS HOT NEWS

A new Aman Resorts property opens this month. The **Aman at Summer Palace**, Beijing, like every other Aman around the world, is spectacularly located. Earlier this year, word got around that the super-luxury hotel was to be set in structures inside the city's famed Summer Palace complex. But no, Aman Resorts carefully clarifies, the hotel is housed in buildings just *outside* the East Gate. Still, these are heritage

structures, several more than a century old, which were used as 'waiting houses' by those seeking an appointment with the Dowager Empress. Inside the hotel, all is elegant: highly timbered living spaces with jin clay tile flooring and Ming period effects. Dining options are vintage Aman: classical Chinese, French kaiseki and Western grill standards. Watch this space. Tariff: \$480-3,800. See [www.amanresorts.com](http://www.amanresorts.com)

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# books



## DREAMING OF JUPITER

Ted Simon  
Roll, Rs 425

Ted Simon was already 42 when he decided to go around the world by motorcycle. That journey, made over four years in the mid-1970s, was chronicled in *Jupiter's Travels*, which went on to become a fairly successful travel book. Nearly 28 years later, he decided to do it again. Simon's new book, *Dreaming of Jupiter*, is the story of this remarkable journey around the world on motorcycle by a man in his early 70s.

There are two very important differences between travelling 30 years ago and earlier, and doing the same journeys today. One is that today many more readers are well travelled. A round-the-world journey isn't quite the jaw-dropper it once was, and unless the writer has both a unique viewpoint and a compelling, insightful voice, any account of such a trip will suffer. Simon does have his distinctive viewpoint, as someone reprising an epic journey, but largely fails to truly engage the reader. Bike buffs will find surprisingly little about motorcycling, and culture aficionados will find few insights that tell them anything new about the world, for instance. Worse, Simon comes across as faintly peevish and curmudgeonly, such as when he grumbles about not being able to speak with the locals in English, or mentions that people haven't heard of him. Perhaps this is an attempt at satire and humorous self-deprecation, but if it is, it's a clumsy and unconvincing attempt.

Fortunately he doesn't always sound that way; he is wonderful to read when he does talk about people he cares about. And there is also the matter of the second big difference between travelling then and now, and he will also hold your interest here, though the mood is rather more sombre. The world truly has become a harder place for adventurous free spirits. Some of it has to do with the inevitable diminishing of discovering new delights in a world where everyone already seems to have been there and done that. There's been another loss—the equal delight of being discovered by one's hosts in an age when travellers weren't as ubiquitous as they now are. These changes are unavoidable in a globalising world. But the nastiest changes are the ones that surely weren't necessary; the havoc wreaked on natural paradises by tourism gone wild and a global population that soared some 2 billion between Simon's two journeys, human habitations that are terribly overcrowded and extraordinarily ugly and, above all, the egregious humiliations handed out by bureaucrats everywhere.

So it's reassuring to read that despite all this, Simon's travels continue to be personally meaningful, and also bring him into contact with lovely, helpful individuals. These are the sorts of experiences that will always make even the most difficult journeys worthwhile.

—Hari Menon



## WAITER RANT

A. Waiter  
John Murray, Rs 495

Cooks have charisma; waiters have penguin suits. This is unfortunate, but true. Throughout history, stories of refinement, greed,

pleasure and excess follow the great chefs around. Lucknow's Mahumdu, executing orders on special occasions for a hundred thousand sheermals; Alexis Soyer, whose one-hundred-guinea banquet extravaganza contained turtle heads, cockscombs, truffles and crawfish.

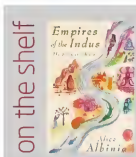
Waiters, in contrast, are rarely heroic figures. As A. Waiter (outed as Steve Dublanica some time ago), ruefully notes, waiters are "people trying to become something else, people whose lives are falling apart, and people stuck somewhere in the middle". *Waiter Rant*, which grew out of Dublanica's popular blog, is something of a poor man's *Kitchen Confidential*.

It's not that A. Waiter/Dublanica doesn't do his best to dish the dirt. You learn that most waiters work long hours, that they despise cheap tipplers (big surprise) and amateur foodies who subject them to an origin-of-the-menu inquiry. Most good restaurants will keep a record of your service history, so be polite the way your mommy said you should; also, it's a big mistake to say you're a friend of the owner's if you're not. You also learn that any waiter worth his salt has two weapons deadlier than phlegm in the soup: they know exactly how to embarrass you, and they apparently have bowels that can produce deadly, silent farts on demand.

Dublanica comes across as a really nice guy—the Waiter Who Cares, but also the tough guy who can stare a mean customer down. To some extent, *Waiter Rant* does let readers see the innards of the foodie industry, and if this book gets the average customer to be a little more sensitive when they eat out, Dublanica's done his job. But *Waiter Rant* doesn't translate as well as some recent food memoirs for a couple of reasons. It's too strongly oriented to American restaurants, and it's not relevant enough to the Indian dining-out scene. It also reads like a blog that was cleaned up and slammed between the covers: think hamburger pretending to be steak.

It's still fun reading *Waiter Rant*, though. Even if its message is very basic: remember that your waiter is human, too, be nice, and if you can't, we hope you like your spaghetti with spit.

Nilanjana S. Roy



## EMPIRES OF THE INDUS

Alice Albinia  
Hachette India, Rs 550

Some of the oldest and most interesting civilisations in the world have arisen on the banks of the Indus. Albinia travels the length of the river—from its origin in Tibet, west into India, and then south into Pakistan—meeting people who live along it, and looking at their heritage and history.



## INDO-PERSIAN TRAVELS IN THE AGE OF DISCOVERIES

Muzaffar Alam, Sanjay Subrahmanyam  
Cambridge University Press, Rs 695

As one would expect of a book by two heavyweights of Indian history, this is a rigorous scholarly discussion, but that doesn't prevent it from being a delightful read as well. In the introduction the authors declare their intention of reading their bouquet of texts with the grain rather than against it. They do not see this as a 'return of the narrative', since in their opinion narrative never really went away, and the recent trends in scholarship of treating texts like machines to be taken apart has never applied to them. This frank admission is a tremendous relief to the reader who has waded neck-deep through many of the jargon-ridden texts produced by modern scholars.

So the two authors proceed to follow their travellers in detail along their routes, summarising their hardships, their observations and their moments of epiphanic delight. And what stories they are! Even those with a minimal interest in the period (1400-1800) will be fascinated by the sheer human quirkiness and drama of the travels of this bunch of diverse people. They include a nameless widow grittily pursuing her dream of pilgrimage to Mecca, a Sufi pir, a Russian trying to make it in an aggressively Muslim world of trade, a bevy of ambassadors and diplomats from the Persian and Ottoman courts, sundry functionaries of the Portuguese Estado da India and a solitary Frenchman (Tavernier). Few of the documents discussed have received much attention from academics in the field of 'travel writing', although they are well known to Persian scholars, and for this the authors gently chide the academic establishment for its Eurocentric and Europhone bias. They predict that their study will produce a different picture of Asia's internal relations than has hitherto been held, and they come through on this promise handsomely. Indeed, in the context of the world of these voyagers, the flimsy solidarities of the so-called 'Third World' (to which Iran and India now belong) appear quite laughable. At the same time, the network of Persian culture and influence thrown over Asia by waves of migration and trade has knitted together the courts of India, Sri Lanka, Sumatra and Thailand and provided a kind of magic carpet (if you will) for these sojourners to get

about on, rather like five-star hotels provide little bolt-holes of English-speaking Western comfort for the modern-day tourist.

The vicissitudes of travel often bring out the human context of the beleaguered traveller. As the authors point out, complaint is one of the tropes in these writings, and then as now the traveller often finds relief from his sorrows by bemoaning his separation from friends and the state of his stomach. In between gripes, the new and unforeseen strike the consciousness of these people on the road with revelatory force, not least the culture, habits and architecture of Calicut, Vijayanagar and the Mughal courts, which they struggle to comprehend. And finally, the physical also parallels a spiritual quest that produces strange results, such as the Russian Alexander Nikitin who after four years in Asia cannot remember the name of God in his own tongue, commending his soul to Khuda and Allah, or Muhammad Balkhi who, in the company of Hindu yogis (and opium hallucinations), shaves his head and travels to Puri, chanting Hari Bol all the way. There are clear parallels between Balkhi's journey and those of 20th-century hippies, not least because having followed his quest to Sri Lanka and back, Balkhi gets a job with the Mughal governor of Orissa and reinvents himself as a respectable nobleman.

This book is worth dipping into for the serious lay reader as well as the scholar, and will not intimidate anyone out of acquaintance with its wonders. The authors navigate us expertly through the rapids of translation, providing extensive paraphrases of the originals along with the Persian for key terms, thus giving a flavour of the original without compromising readability. A book worth having for many reasons.

Rimi B. Chatterjee



## OH! CALCUTTA

Quote on pg 22: 'To sit in the dust of Calcutta is better than to grace the throne of another dominion.'—Mirza Ghalib. Nostalgia is a deep and syrupy well and it's easy to get stuck. I'm not too sure what the

premise of *Calcutta: Repossessing the City* (Om Books; Rs 1,700) is, but presumably photographer Leena Kejriwal is trying to freeze the city in some timeless aspect. The uninitiated Western gaze, towards which I suspect this photo book is directed, will respond with suitable awe. The book is also bound to be well received by the vastly bloated Cal diaspora.

This is one of our most photographed cities and it's a formidable repertoire Kejriwal is up against. So what do these tame, static images add to

our appreciation of the city? Not much. From the Coffee House in all its decaying grandeur to the withering Anglo-Indian community (pics), there is little beyond the obvious here (impressive justificatory essay notwithstanding). Among recent photo books, I'd recommend Rafeeq Ellias's moving (although admittedly more focussed) *Chinatown Kolkata*.

Calcutta is a gargantuan tapestry, an empire of signs—these images barely scratch the surface. Worth a curious flip perhaps, but you won't find yourself returning to them.

Amit Dixit





# QUEEN OF THE RAILS

**Trisha Gupta** finds the grand old lady of Indian Railways can still set hearts aflutter



The bright green *Fairy Queen* on its journey between Delhi and Alwar

In 1837, Victor Hugo wrote a mournful letter to a friend about how going anywhere by train made it impossible to actually see the countryside you were travelling through: "The flowers by the side of the road are no longer flowers but flecks, or rather streaks, of red and white; there are no longer any points, everything becomes a streak..."

But we human beings are quick to adapt. By 1885, the steam-fuelled journey that Hugo found so impossibly fast had already become a certified way of looking at the landscape. Robert Louis Stevenson immortalised the experience of seeing the countryside unfurl as a succession of tableaux, in his 'From a Railway Carriage', a poem whose tempo perfectly reproduces the steady rhythm of the train itself: "...Here is a child who clambors and scrambles,/ All by himself and gathering brambles;/ Here is a tramp who stands and gazes;/ And here is the green for stringing the daisies!/ Here is a cart runaway in the road/ Lumping along with man and load;/ And here is a mill, and there is a river:/ Each a glimpse and gone forever!"

By the time I took the *Fairy Queen* from Delhi Cantonment to Alwar in 2002, this steam locomotive, with a maximum speed of 40km per hour, felt impossibly slow. But slowness was what I had come in search of. Standing out on the engine, next to the driver and his coal-shovelling assistants, I could see everything we passed with a clarity that no Rajdhani journey had ever provided: the vivid yellow of a girl's odhni, the piles of onions being sorted by the roadside, even faces in the curious crowds that gathered to see our quaint contraption trundle by.

Built in Leeds by Kitson, Thompson & Hewitson in 1855, the *Queen* was probably fast enough in the 50-plus years she ran on the Howrah-Raniganj line of the Eastern Indian Railway. In 1971 she became the first exhibit of the National Rail Museum, in whose grassy environs she stayed parked until 1996, when she was given a makeover by the Perambur workshop of the Southern Railway. The little green engine now tows a 60-seater passenger car on a seven-hour, 143km journey from Delhi to Alwar, on weekends between October and March. As the world's oldest functioning locomotive (certified by the *Guinness Book of World Records*), the *Queen* is now, as the Rail Museum website puts it, "a living legend, much older than the *Titanic*".

When she's not chugging along, devouring vast quantities of coal (250kg per kilometre), you can find the *Queen* at Delhi's Rail Museum, where her now gleaming exterior seems almost out of place amidst the general air of 1970s torpor, the peeling black and white photos of Khrushchev's visit to Chittaranjan. Then you read the faded orange sign that begins, "We must innovate. We must constantly improve. Today's...powerful and sleek locomotives hurtle along the countryside faster than ever before..." You can almost hear the *Queen* chuckle. ●

National Rail Museum, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi (011-26881816, [www.nationalrailmuseum.org](http://www.nationalrailmuseum.org)); timings: 9.30am-5.30pm (October-March) and 9.30am-7.30pm (April-September); entry fee: Rs 10 (adults) and Rs 3 (children). Between October and March, the *Fairy Queen* undertakes two-day trips to Alwar on weekends. Tariff: Rs 8,600 (return trip, includes sightseeing and stay); Rs 6,000 (one-way train journey, sightseeing and stay).





Inside the Trinity Church

# Victorian Bangalore

**Anjum Hasan** takes a walk through Bangalore's rich and colourful past

It's easy to miss history when it's staring you in the face. Which is why it's not hard to believe when Roopa Pai of Bangalore Walks says of the mid-19th century Trinity Church, past which thousands of cars roar each day: "It's always open and yet hardly anyone steps in."

Trinity Church is a fitting start to the walk because one assumption behind this Victorian Bangalore story is that since 1799 and the routing of Tipu Sultan, Bangalore has been peaceful. The church bears testimony—the names on its walls are of Englishmen who lived in Bangalore but died in action elsewhere or, as per certain plaques, were mauled by tigers in Shimoga or tumbled down Jog Falls. Which is not to say that Bangalore didn't have its share of casualties. Here again the church stones speak. The 'BM' carved onto one of the steps stands, Roopa thinks, for 'Benchmark', a reference to the famous 19th-century Trigonometrical Survey of India—a gigantic and difficult undertaking that cost many Englishmen their lives.

Roopa tests our knowledge of world history. "What happened in 1789?" "Er... French... something?" we fumble. "In 1776? In 1815?" It turns out that many of the key events of world history are connected to Bangalore. Cornwallis, defeated by George Washington in the American War of Independence, returns to England, then heads, via Calcutta and a Governor-

Generalship, to South India to see if he can instead try his hand at quelling a menace called Tipu Sultan. He temporarily succeeds. Louis XVI promises Tipu support but then goes and gets himself guillotined. Richard Wellesley, a later Governor-General, gets his inexperienced younger brother, Arthur, to command a division against Tipu in the 1799 battle that vanquishes the latter. Arthur goes on to become Duke of Wellington and defeat Napoleon at Waterloo.

So no Tipu, no setting up of cantonment Bangalore, no M.G. Road, no walk on this drizzly Sunday morning. And without the French Revolution, would those on the walk who are visitors from Delhi have needed passports to fly south of the Vindhyas? Perhaps. The traffic, the

hoardings, the glass and chrome of M.G. Road seem lightweight suddenly—they're all part of the dispensable sets of the theatre of history.

In the event, the British took Mysore, reinstalled the Maharajas, and created the township we are walking through, though only the barest of signs remain. An overgrown plot could be where the bungalow of a certain Winston Churchill once stood. As a young man in the Queen's Own 4th Hussars Regiment, he spent three leisurely years in Bangalore, reading voraciously, chasing butterflies and, in his own words, devoting himself "...to the serious purpose of life. This was expressed in one word—Polo."

With the British came the Mudaliar businessmen, Persian horse traders, Indian Muslims to supply leather and meat, Christian missionaries, European ladies in search of eligible bachelors. Standing by a slushy pit that has just replaced a colonial bungalow, we sing a Kiplingesque ditty along with Roopa: "I'll follow my Bangalore Man, I'll do the best I can..." But Bangalore has always been a town of immigrants, she explains. The Vijayanagar chieftain Kempegowda set up base here in 1537, resulting in the creation of a fortified settlement organised around different trades to which settlers from elsewhere were actively invited.

The Walk is a glorious collection of facts and vignettes, cleverly choreographed around leading sights. We're standing, for instance, in the grounds of the East Parade Church. This was built for Indian regiments, says Roopa, particularly the highly-decorated Madras Sappers. She hands out fuzzy pictures of an American soldier holding a prominently labelled 'Bangalore Torpedo'. "Guess who?" she asks. I won't tell, but the point is that the Madras Sappers created this barbed-wire blasting torpedo which has been in regular use since World War I. Who says the expression 'to be Bangalored' is of recent vintage?

Now look across the road, she says. Behind a power grid stands the also-colonial Karnataka Electricity Board building. "That building is another reason why the world has been Bangalored. Guess how?" Through yet another fascinating



Roopa Pai conducting a walk (top); and breakfast at the restaurant, 13th Floor

story involving an Irish geologist prospector called Lavelle, the Kolar gold mines, the forward-looking Dewan of Mysore—Sir Visvesvaraya—and the fact that the first light bulb in Asia was switched on in Bangalore in 1905.

Bangalore Walks is the richest live introduction to the city one could hope for. People from all over the world do it, but it's most likely the Bangalore resident who, labouring under long-term ignorance, experiences the greatest epiphanies. Why is there a statue of a German missionary

just off the city's most famous road? Who under the direction of the Maharajas of Mysore systematically greened Bangalore? Please sacrifice just one Saturday night party, wake up early on a Sunday, and spend a couple of hours walking with Roopa Pai. ●

*The Victorian Bangalore Walk is organised by Bangalore Walks every Sunday. Tariff: Rs 495 (includes breakfast); timings: 7am-10am; contact: 9880671192, [www.bangalorewalks.com](http://www.bangalorewalks.com). Also on offer are a Green Heritage Walk and a Traditional Bangaluru Walk.*

Surprises at every turn: a Buddha in the forest, Chiang Rai



# REDISCOVERY

Last year, 500,000 Indians visited Thailand. This Southeast Asian paradise should therefore hold no surprises for us. But truth be told, rarely do we venture beyond Bangkok and the tourist traps to the south. This issue, *Outlook Traveller* goes where few of us have gone before. All we had to do was take an about-turn and head deep into the north of the country, a land of rolling hills and gentle tribes, coffee-coloured rivers and fertile farmland. There's also a list of 10 surprising destinations you didn't know about, from national parks to secret beaches. No, we haven't forgotten the Bangkok junkie. Just tuck into our insider's guide to the vibrant Thai capital. Finally, we handhold you through the city's dizzying culinary maze. Ah, now you're an expert. But remember—you read it here first.





A bamboo bridge over the Mae Kok river, a tributary of the Mae Khong, in Chiang Rai; and (right) a placid moment in the life of the river



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**Rimli Sengupta** heads for the hills.  
Photographs by **Ahtushi Deshpande**



From a bluff high above the river, the Mae Khong is a wide ribbon of frothy coffee cutting through a khaki green carpet. I go down to the river for my first touch and I am already in Laos; the Thai-Laos border in these parts is along the Thai shore. On the riverfront promenade, I walk to the boat dock past canopied Thai massage stations with masses of beached white flesh. Small dinghies fitted with outboard motors ply the Mae Khong here. None of the boats agree to float downstream, that would mean submitting to the river's caprices.

As the motor pushes my boat upstream I get a sense of the river's weight. Mae Khong: Mother Khong to the Thai, Mekong to the others, is the much storied life force of Southeast Asia. This being early September, the river is celebrating her monsoon girth. A tremendous rush of muddy water, with foaming whitecaps in places, flows about 14 feet above normal. As I head north towards the confluence of the Mae Khong with the Ruak river, Burma is up ahead across the Ruak, Thailand is to my left, Laos to the right, and China just 275km upstream. But all I see is the river. I am mesmerised by the enormous eddies churning all around my tiny boat as the river flexes





her muscles. The outboard motor is all that stands between me and the river. A part of me wants to cut the motor and let her carry me like a twig, all the way past Vietnam to the South China Sea.

I boarded the boat near the northern tip of Thailand, at the ancient capital of Chiang Saen. I am on a week-long trip through North Thailand: starting at Chiang Rai, winding my way through the hilly tribal areas near the Burmese border, and ending in Chiang Mai. The north has been central to the history of imperial Siam. Over the course of the

13th century, the capital of the Lanna kingdom moved south from Chiang Saen to Chiang Rai, and eventually to Chiang Mai. But ruins are hard to come by; restoration is the norm. The moat around the old city of Chiang Saen now resembles an innocuous storm drain. But inside the Wat Pa Sak complex, gnarly laterite columns provide a glimpse of the vanished grandeur of the prayer hall in front of the main chedi. This is the only wat I see on this trip that has intact, original stucco figures of Buddha and Mahakaal. A heavy mantle of moss cov-

ers the chedi, and the outlines of what must have been the monastery walls.

Chiang Rai, once an imperial capital, is now a laid-back small town. I am lodged at the Golden Triangle Inn, where my room is sheltered by a shady verandah overlooking a tropical garden replete with orchids. I happily pad barefoot on my teak-panelled floor, worn to a high sheen. The weather has been kind. I am lulled to sleep each night by the drone of rain on the corrugated roof, and wake to birdcalls and a freshly washed morning. Jane, the man in charge, walks about in



a denim kurta-sarong ensemble, with a jangle of gold chains, and a bracelet bearing his name. "Used to be," that's what his name means, he says with a half-sigh. He lives on the premises and weeds the garden himself. Is he the owner? "Maybe," is his somewhat evasive response. I later find out that the owner is a lady in her eighties who also lives on the premises. Perhaps Jane has some plans. Be that as it may, he agrees to drive me to points of interest around Chiang Rai in his prehistoric Volvo.

En route to the hill station at Doi Mae

Salong, our first stop is at the Pa Tueng hot spring. The spring bubbles out of the ground less than hundred feet from a river, its tall plume of steam set off handsomely against the green paddies nearby and the blue hills in the distance. The snack shack here is run by an old woman who has been fending off lucrative offers from investors who want to build a spa. Boiling eggs in a hot spring is a favourite Thai pastime. A bamboo-slat bag with a dozen quail eggs is strung up from a stick so you can dip it into the boiling water. Jane makes a special dip

with soy sauce, ginger and black pepper. He then teaches me how to dunk the peeled egg after exposing the yolk slightly. Paired with toothsome steamed bamboo shoots, this is an exquisite ensemble of texture and flavour.

At Mae Chan we turn off from the main highway and the hills are suddenly under us. A steep uphill stretch along a ridge leaves Jane's Volvo wheezing, so we stop at a bamboo shelter by the road. The scene in front of me could be a Cézanne canvas: purple-green pineapple fields falling away from my feet, ochre-



This page, from left: schoolchildren at the tribal centre in Chiang Rai; and two Akha women. Facing: a member of the Yao tribe; and a long-necked Karen Padung tribal woman



green corn rising on the near slopes, rice paddies an iridescent green on the far slopes, and dense bamboo a smoky blue on the hills beyond. As a cicada chorus rises and falls and a cool breeze ruffles the thatch of our shelter, the serenity of this place seeps into me.

These comely hills used to be prime opium country, central to the infamous Thai-Burma-Laos Golden Triangle that supplied much of the world's narcotics until recently. On each hill, opium would be sown on the sunrise side and marijuana on the sunset. This is the neighbourhood that housed Khun Sa, the dreaded Burmese warlord and drug kingpin whose word was law in the Thai-Burma border region until the mid-nineties. The guns have fallen silent, Khun Sa is dead, and opium paraphernalia have been swept into museums. Come January, one can still spot a few

## THESE HILLS ARE HOME TO THAILAND'S NORTHERN TRIBES: AKHA, KAREN, LAHU, YAO AND MANY OTHERS, EACH WITH ITS OWN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

opium poppies, but they are carefully planted along steep grades to avoid the prying eyes of Thai military helicopters. A wildly successful crop substitution programme has carpeted these fertile hills with tea, coffee, pineapple, corn and avocado. Having tasted each of these post-opium crops, I can report that this soil has no memory.

These hills are home to Thailand's northern tribes: Akha, Karen, Lahu, Yao, and many others, each with its own language and culture. Near Doi Mae Salong, we stop at a Yao village at the home of Jane's friend, Chi Quay, 54. Chi's family left China's Yunnan province and headed south five genera-

tions ago with a few precious possessions, notably the family seal and the ancestral registry. Chi brings out the seal to face the sun: it is a row of four highly stylised horses; animals plentiful in the Yunnan but completely absent in his adopted land. The ancestral registry is a dog-eared sheaf of hand-made paper wrapped lovingly in silk, bearing the names of 19 generations in Chinese characters. Reciting these names is central to Chi's spiritual practice. Chi has the slow, deliberate manner of a retired librarian, who is clearly accustomed to suffering fools. In response to my request that he read from the registry, he gets up with a bemused look and





arranges himself on a low stool on the porch. Then on second thought, he looks up at Jane and asks if I want him to dress up in Yao finery for the reading. That look instantly transports me into a parallel universe where everybody wears spandex, where strangers troop into my home bearing thinly veiled admission fees in the form of fried chickens and ask me to read from the *Geetanjali*. And I ask the group's guide if I should wear a Dhonkhali sari.

The drive to Mae Sai, at the border with Burma, takes me past miles of verdant jasmine rice glowing in the late sun. This is Thailand's chief cash crop, contributing over 12 per cent to the nation's GDP. We glide on smooth spotless roads, with spiffy signs, past police checkpoints with smartly dressed men who try to keep the illicit opium from leaching in from Burma. North Thailand's civic infrastructure looks first world. There is not a speck of trash anywhere, urban or rural. Across the border from Mae Sai is the Burmese town of Tachilek, the two connected by a bridge over the river Ruak. Standing at the Thai



**A guesthouse built in traditional style in Mae Sai (top); and paddy fields**

end of the bridge, I can see familiar clumps of plastic bags and putrid waste clinging to the Burmese shore. For the first and only time during the entire week, I see children begging. They have delicate Burmese features. As I climb down the hilly path from a viewpoint of the border area, I hear a group of excited voices. The day's lottery announcements have just been made. A lone monk in

robes checks out the listings, disappointment writ large on his face.

A two-day trek into the tribal areas begins with a ride on the Mae Kok river on a long-tailed boat. It takes me from Chiang Rai to a Lahu village about 30km upstream. The Mae Kok's shores are truly picturesque: paddies in places, teak plantations in others; on occasion, a hill rises directly from the water's edge, or a



hot spring bubbles not 20 feet ashore. My guide is Kuan, a member of the Shan tribe originally from south Burma. At 31, he is single; his girlfriend has left him for an older man with money. "That's what Thai women want," he says. He's probably not just being bitter. During the week, I can't help notice all the pretty young Thai arm-candy on grizzled white men. Our trail winds up and down hillsides covered with exuberant monsoon vegetation, past gurgling brooks, under shady arches of bamboo, and along aisles of stepped rice paddies. This part of the rural north still sees some

participation in the opium traffic from Burma. In the villages we walk past, dealer homes stand out like flashy scarecrows in an otherwise uniform field of bamboo-rattan-thatch structures. Their gleaming 4WD pickups routinely get stuck in the tracks of glutinous mud that connect their village to the outside.

Kuan carries a sharp machete lodged in a handmade rattan sheath attached to

his belt. He uses it to cut through overgrown foliage, and to harvest choice bits of bamboo. I soon discover he is finessing his finds into a delightful BB gun. He whittles away intently with his machete while walking, clearly not needing his eyes for the trail, except when foraging. Two slim pieces of bamboo fit snugly, one with a shaft that the other slides into. Bits of wet paper are appar-

## KUAN WHIPS OUT AN ELABORATE MEAL OVER A WOOD FIRE. RICE, STIR-FRIED GREENS, A TOFU AND PORK SOUP, CHICKEN WITH CABBAGE... AND BAMBOO WORMS



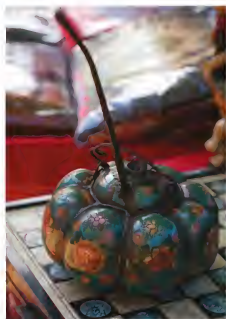
Clockwise from top: snake liquor on sale in Chiang Saen; quail eggs cooking on a burner; a display of wasp eggs at the Chiang Saen market; and bamboo worms at a food stall in the Chiang Rai night bazaar

A tableau at the Opium Museum at the Golden Triangle Park near the Burma border; and an antique opium pipe



ently ideal pellets, which one launches with a swift lunge resulting in an impressive pop, complete with smoke. "For the dogs," he says quite seriously, and hands it to me. This is a man after my own heart. He equips me for dogs even before I can spot them.

In a thicket of bamboo, we come upon a kid who is tentatively trying to harvest worms. Kuan nudges him aside and hacks into the bamboo taking out a three-foot section. As he strips away the outer casing, the compartments within the bamboo shaft come alive. They are crawling with worms, each an inch of fleshy white. One compartment is filled with a sticky goop. "This is the toilet," says Kuan. These worms have excellent toilet habits out of necessity; they would otherwise drown in their own excrement. Each colonised bamboo shaft is a column of bedrooms with a shared toilet, with a hole in each separating knuckle to allow toilet-bound traffic. "These are the cleanest worms in the world,"



## THE INFAMOUS GOLDEN TRIANGLE SUPPLIED MUCH OF THE WORLD'S NARCOTICS TILL RECENTLY

Kuan says as he pops a few live ones into his mouth like so many peanuts. He then instructs the kid to fashion a container—a foot-long piece of green bamboo with a knuckle at the base—and proceeds to gather the harvest. Thus stored, the worms will continue to eat and grow until they are used.

The skies open up as we come into the Lahu village of Ja-noo, our stop for the night. I sit on the bamboo porch of a raised hut and watch fat ropes of rain lash the village and the surrounding hills. This is a small hamlet of a couple dozen homes, but each has a 120W solar panel. They were handed out for free during the rule of Thaksin, the since deposed PM who has fled the country. Inside, Kuan whips out an elaborate meal over a wood fire. Rice, stir-fried greens, a tofu and pork soup, chicken with cabbage, freshly caught fish rubbed with salt and lemongrass, wrapped in leaves and thrown into the embers to roast. And bamboo worms. He picks up

a few dozen from the container, tosses them about in the wok for half a minute, and sprinkles some salt. I pop one in. The skin is flavourful and breaks easily, yielding a rush of juices tasting like bamboo shoots laced with melted cheese. I eat another. Then I can't stop.

During a post-dinner stroll we stop by a home of a friend of Kuan's. Unlike my host's, this home has some furniture, notably a mirrored dresser. Checking out her reflection in it is an emaciated young woman, 24, with a face painted white and lips painted red. She is a cousin who now lives in Bangkok. What does she do? "She works for money," Kuan says after a pause. "She has a husband who is not really legal, you know?" I had heard that rural northern women comprise a significant fraction of Bangkok's storied flesh trade. Does she want to come back to the village? Her sunken eyes flash momentarily, "Never." I can't help wonder if she is wondering what I'm doing here.

Dawn breaks with a grunt chorus from the pigsty in the crawlspace under the hut. As I emerge onto the front porch, the woman of the house is doing last night's dishes with rainwater harvested in buckets left on the deck. I can hear the village waking up: the dull thud of firewood being chopped, the 'thrush-thrush' of rice tossed on a bamboo tray, separating grain from chaff. Three little girls freshen up their hopscootch court that the rain erased last night. On our way out of the village, I see luxuriant rice paddies on a 45-degree slope. Does this strain of rice not require standing water? Even Kuan doesn't know.

Back in Chiang Rai, while strolling through the leafy complex of Wat Phra Kaew, the temple of the Emerald Buddha, I am drawn to the soothing visual of large terracotta vessels brimming

**RUINS ARE HARD TO COME BY; RESTORATION IS THE NORM. BUT INSIDE THE WAT PA SAK, I GLIMPSE A VANISHED GRANDEUR**

The Rong Khun or 'White' temple outside Chiang Rai



with water. Some have lotus leaves, barely resting on the surface, with tiny ornamental fish flitting about. Turtles bask on wooden platforms placed in a serene pond. A monk is sweeping what looks to me like a spotless courtyard. "Ah, India!" he exults, "Taj Mahal. Varanasi." "Bodhi Gaya," I butt in thoughtlessly. His face falls; I have clearly interrupted his travel reverie with curricular thoughts.

The last day, I am in Chiang Mai staying at the Chedi. From the glass balcony of

my third floor suite, I can see a reflecting pool in the central courtyard that has floating candles in glass enclosures. In the evening, with the candles lit and reflected, the place has the air of a silent Diwali. And then rain. I watch the man who had just finished lighting the candles. As rain pelts the candles, snuffing some out and toppling others, he winces in frustration. Then he goes still and waits. The rain will stop. He will pick up each candle, and light them all again. •

## THE INFORMATION

TAN404Y



## GETTING THERE

Bangkok is well connected by air to all major Indian metros. BY AIR **Chiang Mai** and **Chiang Rai** are both short domestic hops from Bangkok, served by Thai Airways or Bangkok Air. I flew into Chiang Rai and out of Chiang Mai, all on Thai. The total cost of the tickets (Kolkata-Bangkok-Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai-Bangkok-Kolkata) was approx. Rs 25,000, inclusive of taxes. A comparable itinerary ex-Delhi would cost approximately Rs 35,000. BY RAIL Chiang Rai is not connected by rail, but you can take the **train from Bangkok** to Chiang Mai. Most journeys are overnight and take 12-15 hr. There are some day trains if you wish to take in the scenery. On the train there are a number of choices: first class has private

cabins for two, second-class sleeping berths have either AC or fan. Sprinter trains have AC chair-cars and are faster. For timings and fares, see [www.1stopchongmai.com/getting\\_here/train](http://www.1stopchongmai.com/getting_here/train). BY BUS Both Chiang Mai and Rai are served by **overnight buses** from Bangkok, a 10 hr ride to Mai, 11 to Rai. **VIP buses** are super-plush, with wide push-back seats. Timings and fares can be found at [www.1stopbongkok.com/getting\\_here/bus](http://www.1stopbongkok.com/getting_here/bus). I took a VIP bus from Chiang Rai to Chiang Mai. A smooth 3 hr ride, with an on-board loo, was a complete bargain at 295 baht.

## VISAS

Thailand issues **visas on arrival** at its airports at Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. A checklist for this service can be found at

[www.mfgo.th/web/2482.php?id=2491](http://www.mfgo.th/web/2482.php?id=2491). If you'd like to get your visa in advance use the **Visa Facilitation Service** ([www.vfs-thailand.co.in](http://www.vfs-thailand.co.in)) or apply directly at the Royal Thai Embassy, 56-N Nyaya Marg, Chanakayapuri, New Delhi (011-26118103, [thaiemb@thaiemb.org.in](mailto:thaiemb@thaiemb.org.in)); or 18B Mandeville Gardens, Kolkata (033-2440625, [rtcgkk@eth.net](mailto:rtcgkk@eth.net)). A 60-day, single-entry tourist visa costs Rs 1,400.

## CHIANG RAI

**GETTING AROUND** A cab ride from the airport should be about 300 baht. The bus station is right in the heart of town, with a bevy of tuk-tuks to carry you places. This is a small town, much of it very walkable. Should your feet need rest, most tuk-tuk rides are under 40 baht. Your hotel can also book a cab.

## WHERE TO STAY

**HIGH-END** The **Dusit Island Resort** (from 3,050 baht, +66-0-5360-7999, [www.dusit.com](http://www.dusit.com)) and **The Legend** (from 3,900 baht; 5391-0400, [www.the-legend-chiangrai.com](http://www.the-legend-chiangrai.com)) are both near the Mae Kok river. There is also the edgy boutique hotel **The Mantrini** (from 2,590 baht; 5360-1555, [www.mantrini.com](http://www.mantrini.com)). But it's the newly refurbished and swanky **Anantara Golden Triangle** (from 6,600 baht; 5378-4084, [www.anantara.com](http://www.anantara.com)) that has pride of place at the highest-end of Chiang Rai's few luxury hotels. **MID-RANGE** There are several nice options available in this price category. Try the **Starbright Hotel** (from 1,995 baht; 5375-2960, [www.star-brighthotel.com](http://www.star-brighthotel.com)) and **Wangcome Hotel** (from 1,400 baht, 5371-1800,

[www.wongcome.com](http://www.wongcome.com)). **BUDGET** Centrally located with the night bazaar and restaurants just a short walk away, the **Golden Triangle Inn** (650 baht AC single/ B00 baht AC double, breakfast included; 5371-1339, [www.goldenchiangrai.com](http://www.goldenchiangrai.com)) is a gem. My incredibly cosy room had teak-panel floors and bamboo mats on the walls and the gabled ceiling. The garden was chock-full of fruit trees—mangoes, coconuts, bananas—all in fruit. To arrange forays ex-Chiang Rai, Golden Triangle Tours is conveniently located on the premises. The hotel arranges tours as well. The **Baan Warabordee** (from 400 baht; 53754488) is also well regarded.

## WHERE TO EAT &amp; DRINK

I wanted to sample Lanna cuisine (Thai with Burmese shades) and every local finger pointed at **Phu Lue** (612/6 Phaholyothin Rd). My tamarian-based pork curry was stunning, and the chicken with young jackfruit richly satisfying. If you want to dine alfresco in a festive but noisy setting, the place to be is the **night bazaar food court**. Every night between 7pm and 11 pm, dozens of stalls serve up soups, stir-fries, spicy seafood salads, grilled fish, sushi, tempura and exquisite clay pot ensembles that are brought to your table and assembled with great ceremony. The quality is high, prices shockingly low.

## WHAT TO SEE &amp; DO IN TOWN

> Visit the city's various **wats**. Wat Phra Singh, Wat Phra Kaew, Wat Ngam Muang, Wat Doi Tong, the city's oldest, sits atop a small hill with charming views of the Mae Kok river.

## &gt; The Mengrai

**Monument**, tribute to the 13th-century founder of the city, is best viewed at night. Locals from all walks of life come to pay daily homage. > A walk through the main market in the centre of town will provide at least a visual introduction to the incredibly rich back story of a **Thai meal**. From live eels to towering stupas of fresh curry paste, this place is a feast for the senses.

> The **night bazaar**, with dozens of stalls offering textiles and handicrafts, is a good place for gift shopping. Bargaining required.

**DAY TRIPS** The Golden Triangle Inn arranged the day trips for me. You could also use **Golden Triangle Tours** ([gotour@loxinfo.co.th](http://gotour@loxinfo.co.th)) for a much better car than mine, somewhat higher prices and a lot less flexibility. The price is for the car, driver and a certified guide. > Head north towards the **Myanmar border**. Chiang Saen, Mae Hong Son (600 baht for a boat ride from Chiang Saen to the Golden Triangle), Opium Museum (entry 50 baht), Mae Sai. En route, the 5-tribes rural development centre (entry 500 baht) offers you your only opportunity to see long-necked Karen women, albeit in a less than natural setting. Price: 3,000 baht excluding the above fees. > Head northwest to **Doi Mae Salong** (1,408m). Stop at the Pa Tung boat spring, and a Yao village en route. Visit the Kuomintang village of Santi Kiri. Have a Yunnanese lunch. Stroll through tea plantations. Price: 2,500 baht

**TREKS** Most treks on offer are a combination of some 4-wheeling on rural roads,



Contemporary design complements a classic lotus pond landscape at The Chedi, Chiang Mai



some elephant riding, some boat riding and some walking. You are likely to see real rural life of several tribes, up close. My guide Kuanchai Woham (kuan999@hotmail.com, 899984653) works for **9 Hill Tribes Tour** (\$87 Rummit M2, Meayao Mung, Chiang Rai 57000). Chiang Rai has numerous trek operator shops along the main drag near the night bazaar, with elaborate photo galleries. If you feel more comfortable booking in advance (prices are lower in person), see [www.asia-discovery.com/chiangmai/trekking](http://www.asia-discovery.com/chiangmai/trekking). I paid \$400 baht for 2 persons for a 20/1N trek, inclusive of all meals, a 4WD SUV (Kuan drove), a 30min elephant ride in a Karen village, a 45min long-tailed boat ride on the Mae Kok river and a homestay at a Lahu village. My visit was off-season; prices are higher starting November.

#### CHIANG MAI

**GETTING AROUND** The options are similar to those in Chiang Rai, but this is a much larger city, so the distances are likely greater on average

#### WHERE TO STAY

Chiang Mai is by far North Thailand's most popular destination—and the range of hotels reflects this. **HIGH-END The Chedi** (from 12,000 baht; [www.ghmhotels.com](http://www.ghmhotels.com)) has a charming location right on the Mae Ping river. As you come into the lobby from the bustle of Chiang Mai, white lotuses afloat in vessels brimming with water will instantly have a calming effect. My Club Suite was spacious (100 sq m) with traditional teak and rattan features paired expertly with terrazzo and glass. A generous balcony with a daybed overlooked a restored colonial

bungalow (that houses the restaurant) with the river behind it. The staff speak excellent English, and have the same soothing quality as the lotus-vessels. The colourful night market is less than a five-minute walk away. **The Four Seasons** (from 18,000 baht; 5329-8181, [www.fourseasons.com](http://www.fourseasons.com)) and the **Mandarin Oriental Dhara Devi** (from \$385; 5388-8888, [www.mandarinoriental.com](http://www.mandarinoriental.com)) are other outstanding resorts. **MID-RANGE Tamarind Village** (from 4,500 baht; 5341-8896-9, [www.tamarindvillage.com](http://www.tamarindvillage.com)) is a lovely, leafy hotel actually set inside the walls of historic Chiang Mai city. Also try **Villa Water Orchid** (from \$90, 3566-5200, [www.waterorchid.com](http://www.waterorchid.com)). **BUDGET Elliebum** (from 1,000 baht; 5381-4723, [www.elliebum.com](http://www.elliebum.com)) is also inside the old city.

**Baan Orapin** (from 1,800 baht; 8161-64016, [www.baanorapin.com](http://www.baanorapin.com)) is an elegant little B&B, built in the Lanna architectural style. Even cheaper are **Ban Kong Rao**, a family-run boutique guesthouse (from 700 baht; 5340-4909, [www.bancongkao.com](http://www.bancongkao.com)), and a hostelry called **Green Tulip House** (from 250 baht; 5327-8367, [www.greentuliphouse.com](http://www.greentuliphouse.com)).

#### WHAT TO SEE & DO IN TOWN

> The ruins of the **old city** walls and the surrounding moat are pleasant to walk along. There is a charming market for cooked meals at the Chiang Mai gate, where tiny women carry around vast amounts of food on two-wheelers. Inside the old city walls, Wat Phan Tao has a spectacular prayer hall with moulded teak-panels fitted together.

> **Wiang Kum Kam** A 20min journey on the Mae Ping river, on a teak-fitted cruise boat to the Fisherman's Quay, where a horse-drawn carriage takes you on a tour of the ruins of this 13th-century city (2hr, 700 baht; call 053-252873).

#### DAY TRIPS

> **Doi Inthanon**: Thailand's highest mountain (2,565m) is inside a national park, 25hr southwest of Chiang Mai. There are several chedis on this mountain. The view from the top can be quite spectacular in clear weather. Park entry: 400 baht  
> **Chiang Dao caves** This is a cave complex housed in limestone scarps (2,175m) 75km north of Chiang Mai. The cave system is fluorescently lit in places, but in others you need a guide with a kerosene lantern to show you the treasures.

Rimti Sengupta



# HIDDEN THAILAND

10 more reasons to avoid the kingdom's more obvious attractions



## 1 SURIN

This town in northeastern Thailand is a melting pot of Suay, Khmer and Lao cultures, and famous for its exquisite silk, refined silver jewellery and its elephant-love. Visitors throng Surin in November for the elephant festival, but you could go any time, for all the reasons listed but, most of all, to make a trip to **Prasat Hin Phanom Rung** (pic), 3hr away. Built on an isolated mountaintop, this 10th-century temple is the most impressive Angkor temple in Thailand. Facing east—towards the grandest instance of the Angkor temple-building art, the Angkor Wat in Cambodia—it commands a sweeping view of the plains. The architectural style is High Khmer, with a walkway flanked by nagas, carved lintels and exquisite bas-reliefs. *Surin is an 8-9hr bus/train ride from Bangkok. Stay at Pirom's Guest House (150-280 baht; +66-4451-5140).*

## 2 ORCHID TRAIL

Phu Luang, 'the big mountain', in the northeastern province of Loei, is a botanist's paradise. This is variegated woodland with an abundance of wild flowers, and remarkable for its astonishing variety of wild orchids. Among the 160 species found here, look out for the rare endemic *Paphiopedilum sukthakulii*, a variant of the 'lady's slipper' orchid that grows on rocks and in the evergreen forest. You'll also find a profusion of rhododendrons, white heather, magenta balsams and blue gentians, making for a stunning vista on the table-top mountain. *Loei is a flight or 10hr bus ride from Bangkok. The Phu Luang park is 60km from Loei and buses run daily. Only parts of the park are open to the public, but this includes a stunning 6km trail. For entry and accommodation, contact Phu Luang Tourist Office (+66-4284-1141).*



### 3 KHAO SOK

The sprawling Khao Sok National Park in southern Thailand offers the gentlest adventure you could crave—watching wildlife as you paddle by on a kayak. The beautiful Cheow Lan reservoir in the park is surrounded by soaring limestone mountains, abundant wildlife and the oldest rainforests in the world. By night, stay in floating lake-bungalows built of bamboo and palm fronds; by day, paddle slowly by the banks, looking out for Malayan tapir, long and stump-tailed macaques and colourful kingfishers. Watch out in particular for hornbills, for you'll find as many as six species of the stately bird here. *Khao Sok National Park* ([www.khaosok.com](http://www.khaosok.com)) is 180km north of Phuket on Highway 401, and is reached by a 6hr bus ride. Arrange your trip with *PaddleAsia* (Ban Kuku, Phuket, +66-7624-0952, [www.paddleasia.com](http://www.paddleasia.com)). A 4-day tour costs 18,460 baht per person.



## 4 ROCK-CLIMBING IN KRABI

Rock-climbers everywhere sing paeans to the steep limestone cliffs of Krabi, and with good reason. There are more than 450 climbs looking out to the Andaman Sea—ranging from easy, pocketed faces to entice the learner to some majestic overhangs and sheer faces to challenge the expert. As if that weren't excitement enough, Krabi has a few unique variations on the theme. It is possible to 'deep-water solo' here—row out to a sea cliff in a

kayak, climb it without rope and then let go, to splash gloriously into the azure waters. Of course, you could just leave the rocks to other, more adventurous souls and settle down on the beautiful sands. *Krabi is a 4hr bus ride from Phuket.* King Climbers' Route Guide is essential reading if you're climbing on your own. For guided tours and beginner courses, contact Wee's Climbing School (from 800 baht; [www.weescimbingsschool.com](http://www.weescimbingsschool.com)).



## 5 KHAO YAI NATIONAL PARK

Thailand's second largest national park is also the oldest. Considered one of the best reserves in the world, Khao Yai is home to some 3,000 varieties of plants, over 300 species of birds and around 70 species of mammals, including tigers, elephants, black bears, gaurs and gibbons. The forests have excellent trekking trails—over 50km of them. With the trails spread over a range of terrain, from grasslands to high mountains (elevation ranges from 100 to 1,400m), there is something for every shade of trekker. *First get to Pak Chong (2-3hr from Bangkok). Pickup trucks will then take you to the park gate. Forest Department bungalows (800-3,600 baht; [www.thaiforestbooking.com](http://www.thaiforestbooking.com)) are located inside the park. The Green Leaf Guesthouse (200 baht; [www.greenleaf4tour.com](http://www.greenleaf4tour.com)) offers simple rooms and well-regarded trekking and birding tours.*

## 6 DIVING IN THE SIMILAN ISLANDS

Easily making the top ten of any diver's favourite spots in the world are the Similan Islands, a group of nine islands lying 85km northwest of bustling Phuket. What makes the area so remarkable is the clear waters—visibility averages 25m and sometimes exceeds 40m. Huge, underwater granite boulders, caverns and 'swim-throughs' create dramatic formations. There are about 200 species of hard coral in these waters and a great profusion of reef fish. Big fish aren't very common but you could likely see the famous leopard shark as well as white tip and black tip sharks. The islands are best enjoyed from live-aboard boats. *The islands lie 120km northwest of Phuket (a bus, taxi and boatride away). Live-aboards come in a wide range (from 5,000 baht/day) to suit your time, budget and comfort. See [www.siamdivers.com](http://www.siamdivers.com)*





## 7 MAE HONG SON LOOP

The Mae Hong Son province is where you should head if you want to go completely off the beaten path. This remote, forested province borders Myanmar's Shan state to the north and west and is home to a number of hill tribes. The winding mountain road from Chiang Mai to Mae Hong Son and back via Mae Sariang is one of the most beautiful drives in northern Thailand—referred to popularly as the 'Mae Hong Son Loop'. En route you pass by the wild sunflower fields of Doi Mae Ho, which are in full bloom in November and December; large Karen villages like Pha Ma Lo which are known for their hand-woven fabrics; hot springs at Mae Na, a little north of Mae Sariang; and Thailand's biggest waterfall at Mae Surin. Hire a car from Chiang Mai—it's a 280km drive one way and 350km the other, and takes a minimum of 7hr each way. Do it slowly, spending a day or so at places en route.



## 8 SI SATCHANALAI

In touristy Thailand, even relatively remote outposts such as Sukhothai have been co-opted into the mainstream. Capital of the first Thai state to replace the Khmer kingdom in the 13th century, Sukhothai certainly offers a wonderful glimpse into Thailand's past. Visit by all means—but if you're looking for the even more unusual, add on a day trip to Si Satchanalai. Located north of Sukhothai, the medieval city is thought to have been built

as a later extension. Less well preserved and arguably less impressive than its more famous counterpart, Si Satchanalai nonetheless affords the 'off-beat' junkie a happy day's rambling. Structures of note include Wat Chang Lom and Wat Mahat. Si Satchanalai is 56km from Sukhothai (connected to Bangkok by air or a 7hr bus ride), best done as a day trip from Sukhothai. Stay at Lotus Village (920-1,540 baht; +66-5562-1463, [www.lotus-village.com](http://www.lotus-village.com)).



## 9 TRAT

With 52 large and small offshore islands, long white sandy beaches, unspoiled coral and lots of wildlife, Trat—Thailand's easternmost province—is the perfect place for wildlife enthusiasts or anyone looking to just get away. The city of Trat, which is the gateway to the region, has several 17th-century Buddhist temples. The Mu Ko Chang National Park, a short ferry ride away from Trat, consists of a group of over 40 islands of which Ko Chang (pic)

is the largest. The islands are mountainous, densely forested and crisscrossed by streams. The tropical evergreen forests here are home to 29 species of mammals like the wild pig, barking deer and Javan mongoose, and to some 74 species of birds. The waters are rife with coral reefs. *Trat city is a 5hr bus journey from Bangkok. A good place to stay is Jungle Way (200–400 baht; +66-8922-34795, [www.jungleway.com](http://www.jungleway.com)), which is surrounded by forest.*



## 10 THE QUIETEST BEACHES

Want a classic beach holiday but frightened by the tourist-traps that are Phuket and Koh Samui? Travel with confidence: we've dug out two secluded beaches in precisely these spots. A part of the crescent-shaped Nai Yang beach (left), on Phuket's northwest coast, is really part of the Sirinath National Park and is still largely undeveloped. The sand is powdery white and the sea here is great for snorkelling. No girlie bars or trance parties or souvenir

shopping here. Mae Nam (right), on Koh Samui island, is even quieter. The 4km-long beach is nearly always empty and there are only a few small restaurants and hotels, set away from the beach. *There are flights from Bangkok to both Phuket and Koh Samui. The classy Nai Yang Beach Resort (2,200–16,500 baht; [www.naiyangbeachresort.com](http://www.naiyangbeachresort.com)) is near the beach. Mae Nam Resort (1,800–2,500 baht; [www.maeamresort.com](http://www.maeamresort.com)) has elegant teak bungalows.*

# City Confidential

Your guide to the Thai capital's essential temptations



PRASHANT PANJARI

## ROYAL RETREAT

The oldest part of Bangkok and the royal district, Ko Ratnakosin is home to three of the most spectacular sites in Bangkok. The Temple of the Emerald Buddha, **Wat Phra Kaew**, is a stunning structure of gilded stupas. The Buddha installed here is actually made of jasper. Next door is the **Grand Palace**, the former royal residence. Do spend some time exploring the many structures here. **Wat Po**, built in the 16th century, is the city's oldest and largest temple and houses the magnificent 46m-long, gold leaf-covered Reclining Buddha. The **National Museum** and **Wat Arun**, the spectacular temple dedicated to our very own god of dawn, are also located nearby.



## WATERWORLD

There is an intimate, almost secret way of engaging with Bangkok—take a trip along the **klongs** or back canals. The waterways separate the original capital Thonburi from today's modern metropolis. As you cruise the intricate network of narrow canals, you are offered glimpses of an unchanged world of villages: wooden houses adorned with profuse flowers, women in sampans selling rice and noodles, people washing and fishing in the waters. Hire a long-tail boat or **hang yao** (400–500 baht, do negotiate) at the Tha Chang ferry pier near the Grand Palace or the pier at the River City Shopping Complex.

## SHOP TALK

From plush department stores to bargain street stalls, lively night bazaars to charming floating markets, Bangkok offers rather too many opportunities to blow your baht. Just a few recommendations: the **Chatuchak weekend market**, spread over an unbelievable 35 acres with around 15,000 shops, offers everything from clothing and household items to Thai handicrafts and religious artefacts. These days Patpong is known more for its **night market** than the stale ping-pong shows. The **Bang Nam Peung floating market** will revive memories of that holiday on the Dal lake. Mall rats should head to **CentralWorld** ([www.centralworld.co.th](http://www.centralworld.co.th)). With over 500 stores, 50 restaurants, 21 cinemas, two department stores and more, it is reputedly the largest mall in Southeast Asia.



## CHINATOWN

Bangkok's vibrant and prosperous

Chinatown is everything that Calcutta's decaying Old Chinatown isn't. The

area runs along Yaowarat Road from the ceremonial Chinese gate to the Ong Ang Canal, where the royal district begins. **Yaowarat Road** curves

like a dragon's body, making it auspicious for businesses. Here you will find gold shops, funerary homes, stationers, tea sellers and restaurants serving shark fin soup. Every morning, the

narrow, congested and entirely delightful Sampeng Lane sees the Chinese community out in full force buying supplies for the day. Do visit the unassuming **Wat Traimit** temple here to gawp at the world's largest solid gold Buddha.





## JIM THOMPSON HOUSE

American Jim Thompson was a former military intelligence officer, who is best remembered for reviving Thailand's dying craft of hand-woven silk. Half a century ago, he galvanised the small-scale industry by improving dyes, looms and wages. His home in Bangkok—a composite of **six antique Thai houses**—draws every art lover who visits Thailand; it houses his superb collection of Buddhist and secular art (pic left). See [www.jimthompsonhouse.com](http://www.jimthompsonhouse.com)

## CLEAN ROOMS

"Sex tourists not welcome, zero tolerance of trouble makers!" And so you are welcomed to **The Atlanta Hotel** (from 500 baht; [www.theatlantahotel.bizland.com](http://www.theatlantahotel.bizland.com)), a Bangkok Institution. The strident tone and high moral road apart, the hotel has a well-preserved art deco-styled foyer, quite unchanged since the 1950s and much in demand as a film set. Among atmospheric lodges is an intimate Sino-Portuguese style boutique hotel called **Arun Residence** (3,500 baht from Nov 2009; [www.arunresidence.com](http://www.arunresidence.com)), on the banks of the Chao Phraya river overlooking Wat Arun. There is also **\$15 Sukhumvit** (from 3,200 baht; [www.s15hotel.com](http://www.s15hotel.com)), a promising-looking new boutique hotel in the business district.

## GETTING AROUND

Bangkok's traffic jams are the worst in the world. If you must travel by car make sure that you avoid rush hour. Mercifully, there are quicker and more fun ways of getting around. The **Skytrain**, Bangkok's elevated rail system, is clean and user-friendly, and provides great views. The ubiquitous **motorcycle taxis** are another fast, cheap, but slightly hair-raising way of getting around. But if you really want to see Bangkok while you travel try one of the **bicycle or train tours** offered by Real Asia Travels and Tours ([www.realasia.net](http://www.realasia.net)). The cycling tours take you along the network of elevated pathways over the city's klongs (canals), while the train tour takes you through the city to seaside markets and a little-visited village.



PRASHANT PANJARI

## MYSTIC MESSAGE

Want a massage but minus the kink? Stick to a **foot massage**. In Bangkok every third establishment is a massage parlour, so you won't have to look far. Prices hover around the 500 baht mark and the massage includes a shoulder and head rub. Responsible tourists may wish to seek out massage by the visually impaired. Rather more intensive and sombre is the experience at the **Wat Po Thai Traditional Medical and Massage School**, which opened in 1955 at the Temple of the Reclining Buddha (pic). A five-day 'General Thai Massage' course costs 8,500 baht. See [www.watpomassage.com](http://www.watpomassage.com)



## ORIENTAL COOKING

Packaged curry pastes are all very well of a night's dinner at home, but for true insights into this subtle food tradition, turn to the masters. The **Oriental Thai Cooking School** at the venerable and still ultra-luxurious **Mandarin Oriental** hotel has been teaching the art for 15 years. The school runs classes every morning; walk-in prices per class start from 4,000 baht, including materials and lunch. If you're looking for more than Thai-cookery-on-the-run, take a package: a 3N/4D package includes accommodation at the hotel, two days of cooking class, breakfast, a dinner at their famed Thai restaurant, a massage and limo transfers for 5,150 for a couple. See [www.mandarinoriental.com](http://www.mandarinoriental.com)



# Capital Fare

Cathy Danh helps you navigate the moveable feast of the east



Thai food is one of the most popular and readily available cuisines in the world. However, a proper distinction must be made between Thai food and *Thai* food. While eateries outside Thailand may employ the same ingredients, techniques and recipes as cooks in the old country, anyone who's ever travelled to Bangkok will tell you that there's a certain intangible mix of atmosphere and flavours that can only be experienced in the original culinary capital. The city literally smells of stir-fried noodles, ripe mangoes, sweet coconut milk and char-grilled meats on a stick. Eating well permeates the soul of the city. In fact, *kin khao rue yang*—have you eaten yet?—is still a common greeting between friends. From sidewalk food vendors to night markets, here are five quintessential Bangkok dining experiences.

## MALL FOOD COURTS

These are fantastic places to start exploring the culinary scene. They are modern, air-conditioned and, best of all, have English menus. With a dozen or more stalls frying, wokking and steaming up a storm, each food court is a feast for the senses. > **CENTRALWORLD FOOD COURT** Under the 'Thai Flavour' banner you'll find a cluster of open-kitchens specialising in traditional Thai meals. Expect everything from scorching bowls of **tom kha kai** (spicy sweet soup with chicken and

Clockwise from top left: roast pig; pad thai at Thip Samai; squid on a stick; swan cream puffs; a dumpling display at a food court; and tamarind fish

coconut milk) to pungent green curries and searing **pan-fried noodles**. Every station has a helpful display of pre-made food items.

*Ratchaprasong intersection, Pothumwan; Skytrain (BTS): Chitlom or Siam. Open 10am-9pm.*

> **MBK FOOD CENTRE** Located on the sixth floor of Mah Boon Krong (MBK), the centre offers everything from rice rolls filled with meat and herbs to **crispy catfish salads** and the usual steaming bowls of noodles. Although not the most modern of Bangkok's malls, the large seating area is always packed. The Kou Asian dining area has a notable menu that includes satisfying vegetarian options. *Phayothai Road, Pothumwan; BTS: Notional Stadium. Open 11am-10pm.*

> **SIAM PARAGON FOOD HALL** Covering nearly half of the mall's expansive ground floor, it is divided into three sections—Food Hall Food Court, Food Hall Gallery and Food Hall Take Home. Head to the joint serving Isan northeast-Thai food, for a mouth-watering **som tam** (spicy green papaya salad) and fragrant **moo satay** (grilled pork kebabs marinated in yellow curry and served with a peanut sauce). *Next to Siam Centre, Pothumwan; BTS: Siam. Open 10am-10pm.*

NOTE: Cash is rarely accepted in food courts. Instead, vendors use value cards or vouchers that can be purchased with Thai baht from nearby kiosks. Remember to cash out cards and vouchers before leaving if you don't plan to return.

## STREET FEAST

Although street food can be intimidating for travellers who are unfamiliar with the language and culinary landscape, they provide cheap, filling and tasty meals to locals. The city's staples include noodle soup stalls, rolling carts of grilled meats, curry and rice kiosks and dessert dealers. It's difficult to go wrong. Just use sight and smell to determine what to eat. Keep your eyes peeled for street vendors along busy small side streets (soi) located off major traffic arteries.

> **Chinatown** Yaowarat, Bangkok's Chinatown, is home to some of the best Chinese restaurants in the city—along with many of the most delicious and inexpensive late-night food stalls. As the sun sets, Chinatown lights up with blaring neon signs and wickedly fluorescent bulbs. Makeshift seafood stalls line the sidewalks and draw such enormous crowds that latecomers have to wait to be seated. Be sure to arrive early and sample



## BANGKOK

delicacies like **roast pork**, bird's nest soup and **shark fin soup**

> **SUKHUMVIT ROAD** The astounding array of dining options sprawling along this road is evidence of its eclectic mix of people and cultures. Forget the fast-food chains and embrace the beauty of street food. Soi 4 is home to spicy Isan bites, while the end of Soi 11 serves up an unforgettable **savoury beef soup**. For Chinese-Thai fusion fare, there's no place quite like the 40-year-old 55 restaurant located on Soi 55.

**Khao niew mamuang**, mango with sticky rice and coconut milk, is a must-have street sweet.

### MARKET MADNESS

The city's vibrant energy seems to be concentrated at Bangkok's multitude of markets—an essential part of life in the city and fabulous places to feast on the cheap.

> **THE CHATUCHAK WEEKEND MARKET** This is the undisputed king of Bangkok's markets. In between shopping for handicrafts, artefacts and clothes, sample local eats like engorged **fish cakes** fried in hot oil, Thai **iced tea-flavoured ice cream** and moist cuts of **barbecued pork**. To locate the food section, either follow your nose or locate one of the many somewhat confusing maps of the market. Best accessed via Skytrain (BTS), and is a short five-minute walk from Ma Chit station. Open Friday through Sunday, 8am-6pm.

> **THA CHANG PIER MARKET** While the historic and ostentatious Grand Palace is on every traveller's must-see list, Tha Chang Market on the river taxi pier nearby is oft overlooked. Before exploring the palace, explore the open-air stalls and pick up a small nibble. After grabbing your snack of choice—the sticky and sweet **chicken drumettes** and the **coconut ice cream topped with lychees, pineapple and corn nibblies** are good picks—grab a seat at one of the many tables under the shady awning.

### LOCAL HAUNTS

Bangkok's neighbourhood restaurants are slightly less chaotic than marketplaces and a bit more transparent than street food vendors. These wholesome and humble holes-in-the-wall are easy on the wallet and offer loud local flavours like you've never tasted before.

> **LEK SEAFOOD** A simple but vivacious eatery situated just underneath the Chong Nonsi BTS platform. This no-frills establishment takes pride in bringing Bangkokians the freshest seafood. Dishes are made to order and prepared a few yards from where patrons dine, creating an intoxicatingly aromatic cloud over the entire area. Locals favour the **tod man pla** (Thai fish cakes), the **hoy law pad ga paow** (stir-fried baby clams with holy basil) and the **pla tub tim sa uen** (deep-fried ruby fish with spicy sauce smothered with garlic, chillies, lime juice, coriander and basil). 156 Sai Phiphat, Narathiwat Ratchanakharin Road, Silom (662-636-6460). Open 5pm-1am.



Clockwise from top: a street-side vendor fries fish cakes; a dizzying selection at Tha Chang Pier Market; and the dessert station in a food court

> **THIP SAMAI** A jaunt to Bangkok would not be complete without a plate of **pad thai**—stir-fried rice noodles with eggs, fish sauce, tamarind, any combination of bean sprouts, shrimp, chicken or tofu, garnished with crushed peanuts, limes and coriander. Established in 1966, Thip Samai is one of the city's most famous pad thai eateries and is always packed with local fares and travellers in the know. The house special comes with giant prawns, cuttlefish and green mangoes. 313 Mahachulalongkorn Road, Samranit, Pranakorn (662-221-6280). Open 5.30pm-1.30am.

### FINE DINING

Before you leave, treat yourself to authentic local foods served in a polished setting. Here are some winning choices.

> **BAAN KHANTHA** Located off Sukhumvit Road, the award-winning restaurant boasts a soothing ambience with rustic décor, cordial service and genuine Thai dishes beautifully served on Celadon tableware. The **kaeng phed ped yang**

**a-ngun**, a roasted duck curry with grapes and pineapples, is an exciting combination of fresh fruit and spicy chillies. To balance the onslaught of fiery dishes, try the **yam woon sen**, a glass noodle salad with squid, shrimp, pork and tomatoes dressed in a vinaigrette. Reservations are encouraged. 36/1 Sukhumvit Sai 23 (2258-4181). Open 11am-2pm and 6-11pm.

> **SPICE MARKET** This restaurant in the Four Seasons hotel is arguably the city's best upscale Thai restaurant. It has an extensive menu featuring dishes from each of the four regions, with a strong focus on Central Thai classics. The **som tum yud mapraow** (spicy heart of palm salad) is highly recommended, as are the **gaeng sab nok pla krai** (black feather fish dumplings curry with eggplant) and **laab goong yang** (grilled river prawns with mint and lemongrass salad). Do save room for dessert because the **bulaloi nga dam** (rice dumpling stuffed with black sesame seeds in ginger and brown syrup) is a crowd pleaser. Impeccable service to boot. Reservations are required for dinner and Sunday brunch; reserve at least a week in advance for the brunch. 155 Rajadamri Road (662-250-1000).

HERITAGE HIMACHAL PRADESH

# THE GODS OF SMALL TOWNS

**Mandavi Mehta** visits the intricate temples of Chamba district in Himachal Pradesh. Photographs by **T. Narayan**





Wake-up call in the town of Chamba in Himachal Pradesh is at 5am, to the sound of a laughing thrush just outside my room at the Chamba Guesthouse. This is echoed almost immediately, and surreally, by raucous laughter emanating from the Chaugan—an expansive maidan that is the pride of this hill town—and reverberating off the Dhauladhar peaks that surround the capital of this former hill kingdom, located on the right bank of the Ravi river.

Once the laughing club of Chamba is done with its morning ritual, a travelling sadhu in a resplendent gold foil crown bedecked with peacock feathers, who is spending a few days in the garden of my guesthouse, begins his ablutions with much hacking and spitting. Then follow the sounds of a hideously discordant chorus—at about 6am, the morning bhajan session begins at the Hari Rai temple just next door to the guesthouse.

I'm so wide awake by now, I rise and amble along to the temple—and discover the first of Chamba's many unsung wonders. A life-size, bronze, four-faced statue of Vishnu, one face showing him as the boar-headed Varaha, another as the lion-headed Narasimha, and the other two embodying his fierce and peaceable forms. The statue, I learn, has a History—though tucked away in this obscure corner of Himachal, its awesome

perfection had attracted the attention of international art thieves, and it was stolen from the temple one night in the early 1970s. Months later, it was recovered during a random check of a large crate at the Bombay docks and triumphantly carted back to Chamba. The Vishnu Vaikuntha statue was made in the 9th or 10th century, at the time the city was founded, by an unknown local genius, but Chamba's once-famed metal sculpting tradition now seems to have found a new direction—in the bazaar I spot a sign proclaiming "Master Sculptor and Metal Casting—Superior Dentures Made Here".

The Hari Rai temple offers the first glimpse of Chamba's rich 1,000-year-old history, belied by the sleepy air of this town which is usually bypassed by tourists in favour of nearby Dalhousie, or other more exotic locales in Himachal. Perhaps for this reason, the town retains a certain chaotic charm, with locals lounging on the Chaugan in or along the banks of the Raavi, eating *kachaloo chaat*

**The Laksana Devi temple in Bharmaur (left); and carvings at the Shakti Devi temple in Chhatrarhi**



or *til chikki*. Winding roads lead uphill through the market and emerge at the majestic Lakshmi Narayan temple complex, patronised by the kings of Chamba and comprising six stone temples constructed in the classical nagara style, three dedicated to Shiva and three to Vishnu. The town has other impressive stone temples scattered throughout, as well as two palaces of the ruling family, the Rang Mahal and the Akhand Chandi Palace, and the impressive Bhuri Singh Museum, which houses a superb collection of Pahari miniatures, copper and stone inscriptions, examples of Chamba's wood-carving tradition and fine stone and metal sculptures.

While the town of Chamba has many hidden surprises, the region's treasures can only be discovered by exploring the wider area that once comprised the territory of Chamba state, an area that was historically bounded by Buddhist lands to the north-east, Kashmir to the north-west and the Punjab plains to the south. A three-hour drive eastwards brings you

## WHILE THE TOWN OF CHAMBA HAS SEVERAL HIDDEN SURPRISES, MANY OTHER TREASURES CAN BE FOUND SCATTERED ACROSS THE TERRITORY OF THE ERSTWHILE CHAMBA STATE

to the town of Bharmaur and to the beginning of the history of Chamba state. The historical record indicates that the lineage of the Chamba rulers was established in Bharmaur, the ancient capital of the state, by a ruler called Meruvarman who ruled in circa 700 AD. Located at 7,000ft, Bharmaur is a tiny town, snow-covered for six months of the year and ringed by snow-clad peaks. Its centrepiece is the majestic Chaurasi temple complex, which houses a number of stone temples along with a jewel-like wooden temple dedicated to Laksana Devi—the goddess Durga slaying the buffalo demon Mahisasura. This small but exquisitely carved temple is perhaps the oldest standing wooden structure in

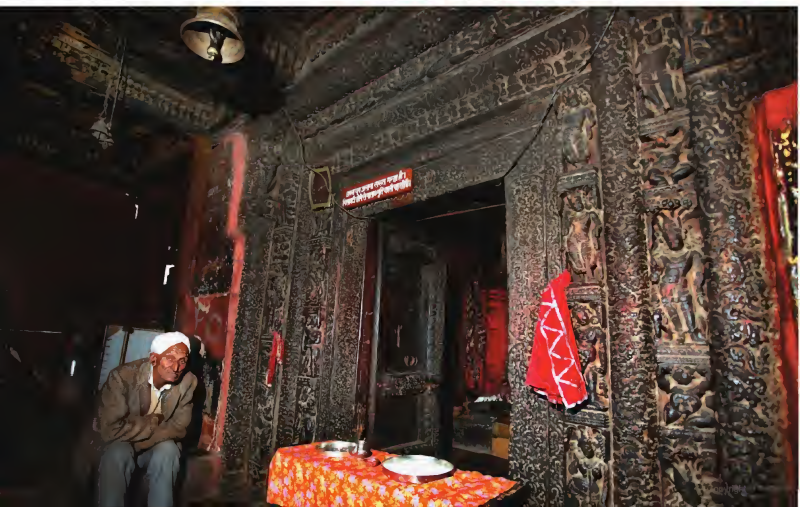
all of India, with parts of it dating to the early 8th century. The external doorway in particular abounds with the most exquisite carving done in a post-Gupta style, with flying gandharvas, amorous couples and door guardians inhabiting every inch of the triangular pediment, arched niches, lintels and door jambs, interspersed with elaborate vegetal scrolls.

The other prominent temples in the complex are dedicated to Shiva, Ganesha and Narasimha respectively, and the latter two house bold and magnificent

**Courtyard of the Shakti Devi temple in Chhatrarhi (above); and gaddis emerging from the Shiv temple in Bharmaur (right)**









bronze images of these two deities, which some scholars have argued might date from the time of Meruvarman. Outside the Shiva temple, under a peaked wooden awning, resides a life-sized bronze Nandi, standing on an inscribed pedestal which attributes its making to a craftsman named Gugga for King Meruvarman. This bull is invariably described as 'brazen' in the scholarly literature, as no other adjective seems to fit its bold and cheery countenance. The curvaceous image of Durga killing the buffalo-demon in the Laksana Devi temple too carries a similar inscription, a testament to the raja who put this isolated hamlet on the map of North India.

The Chaurasi temple complex hardly gets any visitors from outside the region and is blissfully tranquil—until school-closing time when dozens of scrubbed and chattering children from the nearby

## YOUR EYES ARE IMMEDIATELY DRAWN TO THE ELABORATELY CARVED PANELS THAT RING THE CEILING OF THE MANDAPA AREA AND FLANK THE WINDOWS AND DOORS OF THE SANCTUM

government schools spill into the complex to play and run around the temples. Twice a year, in the summer and winter, the town is also host to an influx of semi-nomadic gaddi shepherds and their enormous herds of goats and sheep, who spend a few days in town on their centuries-old migratory route between their winter grazing grounds in the Kangra Valley and their summer pastures across the Dhauladhar and into Lahaul. Bharmaur is the main town of Gadderan—the name of this region in the upper valleys of the Ravi and Budil rivers—which is home to the gaddi community. Seeing the Chaurasi complex and even the interior of temples flooded with their long-haired and colour-coded

livestock is an enchanting sight.

Following a gaddi migratory route from Bharmaur over the Chobia pass, one reaches the small town of Udaipur, located in Lahaul district in Himachal. The landscape, once you cross the Dhauladhar mountains, is stark and inhospitable but breathtaking in its severe and arid beauty. Here you find the small wooden Mirkula Devi temple, its modest exterior bristling with tridents and flags. Once you enter, however, space seems to expand miraculously as your eyes are drawn to the elaborately carved panels that ring the ceiling of the mandapa area and flank the windows and doorway of the sanctum. The temple is dedicated to Kali, and has gone

**Clockwise from left: Shakti Devi temple, Chhatrarhi; Chhatrarhi temple complex; carvings in the Laksana Devi temple**





Stone image of an ancestor at Chhatrarhi (above); and inside the Laxmi Narayan temple complex in Chamba (right)

through several phases of reconstruction and adaptive use. The iconography of the carvings in the Mirkula Devi temple indicate periods of worship as both a Hindu and a Buddhist shrine, while the style of the carvings indicates a blend of the Chamba and Kashmiri traditions. The elaborate doorway—the oldest part of the temple and dating to circa the 10th century—has seven exquisitely carved *sakhas* or bands, alternating between scrollwork and figures, including a magnificent series portraying the incarnations of Vishnu. The ceiling panels are equally detailed, with figures including a sixteen-armed dancing Shiva shown with Parvati, Ganesha, Kartikeya and Nandi, as well as a complex narrative panel of the Buddha subduing Mara and his army. Even today both Hindus and Buddhists worship at the temple.

Approximately midway on the road between Chamba and Bharmaur, at a short tangent from the main road, lies the picturesque gaddi village of Chhatrarhi, home to the wood and stone

Shakti Devi temple. The inner core of the temple dates, like the Laksana Devi temple at Bharmaur, to the eighth century and the brass image of Shakti Devi too bears an inscription to King Meruvarman and his prodigious sculptor Gugga. While this temple has later periods of reconstruction and repair, the wooden pillars in the mandapa, the ceiling and the sanctum doorway are part of this ancient core. The doorway has six *sakhas*, of which the two innermost ones have two *yakshas* at the base emitting creepers from their mouths that fill up the entire surface of the band, while the other *sakhas* consist of floral and figurative bands. The ceiling and pillars are elaborately carved with lotuses, vases of plenty and flying *gandharvas*, and the wonderful state of preservation of these carvings allow one to marvel at their three-dimensionality and detail. The walls of the circumambulatory were filled in with plaster in about the 18th century and covered with mythological paintings in the later Pahari style of Chamba. The village of Chhatrarhi is also notable for its many stone *panihars* (carved fountain slabs) that are still in situ at water sources throughout the village. These *panihars* are unique to the Chamba region, and are elaborately carved with a range of depictions, such as the water-god Varuna, heraldic animals, geometrical designs and the figures of patrons.

The three wooden temples of Chamba state—the Laksana Devi, Shakti Devi and Mirkula Devi—are the preeminent examples of the ancient art of wood carving in Himachal Pradesh. Going from Chamba to Chhatrarhi, Bharmaur and Udaipur to see them takes the traveller on a magical journey through the history of this erstwhile kingdom. Through landscape that changes from lush and verdant to arid and majestic, encountering along the way roaring rivers, unspoiled wilderness, clumps of wild nargis, tiny birds in brilliant reds and yellows, and always, the open and hospitable local inhabitants of these valleys, for whom the sight of a visitor remains a novelty. •







## THE INFORMATION

TANHOY



### GETTING THERE

> **Chamba** is 122km (4hr) from Pathankot. The best way to get to Pathankot is to take the overnight Jammu Mail (Rs 774 on 2A) from Delhi.

> **Bharmaur** is 65km (3hr) from Chamba. There is a regular bus service.

> **Chhatrarhi** is 40km (1.5hr) from Chamba and is connected by a regular bus service to Chamba and Bharmaur.

> **Udaipur** is a 4-day trek over the Chobia pass from Chamba. Alternatively, you can take the road via Manali and the Rohtang Pass (12hr).

### WHERE TO STAY

> **CHAMBA** The **HPTDC Hotel Iravati** (Rs 700-1,500; 01899-222671) is a large hotel in the middle of town with spacious and reasonably clean rooms. **Hotel Aroma Palace** (Rs 500-3,000; 225577) is another comfortable option. If you don't mind staying a distance away head to **Orchard Hut** (Rs 450-900; 222507, 226764, [www.himalayonline.com/orchard.html](http://www.himalayonline.com/orchard.html)) in Rulpu village, about 1.2km from Chamba, where you can stay in comfortable traditional rooms in the middle of orchards and fields. It even has a pool!

> **BHARMAUR** The **HPPWD Rest House** (Rs 250; 01895-225003) is centrally located with seven rooms, attached bathrooms, and serves meals.

> **UDAIPUR** The only place to stay here is the **HPPWD Guest House** (Rs 250; 01909-22237).

**LITERATURE** Those interested in reading about the dating and stylistic analysis of the wooden temples of Chamba should try to get hold of the now out of print book by the German scholar Hermann Goetz, *The Early Wooden Temples of Chamba*, published in 1955. For a broader overview of the stone and wooden temples of Himachal Pradesh, read O.C. Handa's *Temple Architecture of the Western Himalaya: Wooden Temples*, and Laxman S. Thakur's *The Architectural Heritage of Himachal Pradesh: Origin and Development of Temple Styles*.

# THE GOOD EARTH

**Radhika P. Nair** explores the splendours of Sindhudurg. Photographs by **Jason Mendez**

**T**he beach was empty. A lone dog with sad beady eyes trailed me up and down the sand. The sea was slumbering but the calm, I knew, was deceptive—the Arabian Sea can be treacherous in the monsoon. The fishermen grouped together on the far side of Sindhudurg's Tarkarli beach know this well and, on days like this, do not venture out to sea in their tiny wooden boats. Today, like every other day in the wet season, they must have let out their nets from the beach early in the morning. I watched at noon as they

hauled the nets back, inch by painful inch. I had spent an idyllic morning at Tarkarli—studying rotten logs bobbing on the waves, inspecting the superbly located (almost on the beach) but unimpressive MTDC resort, admiring the rain clouds regrouping over the horizon and, of course, watching the fishermen draw in their catch. But my trip to Sindhudurg, Maharashtra's lush southernmost district, had begun on a rather different note two days before.

The rains greeted me at Goa's Dabolim airport and did not let up even when I crossed the border into Maharashtra. My destination, Sawantwadi, was just 10km away on the national highway. But in the



nondescript town of Banda, our progress was stilled by a flooded bridge. The stream that was supposed to flow under the bridge was a raging torrent over it. I sat in the car. Minutes turned to hours, and the downpour got heavier. We had reached Banda in the morning and by four in the afternoon the call of nearby Goa was too loud to resist. Just when I had lost all hope, a group of idling policemen informed us that an alternative, albeit longer, route might be in better shape. We retraced our tyre marks to the Goa border, took the state highway, sailed over a bridge that was about to go under and reached Sawantwadi and Amrutha Padgaonkar's Nandan Farms—my home for the next four days.

Amrutha greeted me like a long lost cousin, fetched me a steaming cup of tea, organised hot water for a bath and made me very comfortable. Amrutha's farm is one of the homestays promoted by Culture Aangan, an NGO that supports the arts and crafts of Sindhudurg. At the moment three homestays are

operational, with at least two more likely to take in guests from December this year. My cottage at Nandan Farms was a restored outhouse with ancient solid wood beams supporting the sloping tiled roof, with a large covered verandah that could be used as an extra room. While I ate my dinner of tasty prawns-in-coconut gravy, fried fish, beans and coconut fry, rotis and the kokum and coconut milk digestive, *sol kadi*, and, later, when I went off to sleep that night, the incessant pitter-patter was my only worry.

Next morning, we drove to Amboli, the district's British-era hill station. As we ascended, the rain, which had refused to stop, was joined by a swirling mist. As we drove through the town, buildings appeared and disappeared in the mist. In waterlogged fields, paddy saplings did the Mexican wave in the wind. We reached Nagartas waterfall, a stunning cascade of thundering water that plunged into a deep ravine. A viewing bridge here lets you stare right into the

abyss. The Hiranyakeshi shrine, which marks the spot where the Hiranyakeshi river emerges from a cave, is another must-see in Amboli.

Later in the day, Amrutha accompanied me to the Fruit Research Centre at Vengurla. Sindhudurg is fertile country, covered with rice fields and numerous fruit orchards. The best alphonso mangoes are said to come from here. The area is also known for its cashew, jamun and kokum produce. The grounds of the Research Centre are covered with specimens of these trees and much other local flora. At sunset we made our way to the town beach, Sagareshwar. We had the powdery sands almost entirely to ourselves. The lighthouse, located on a spur above the jetty beyond the beach, winked at us. With our backs against the wind, we ate bhel puri by the light of the chaatwalla's hurricane lamp. The MTDC resort skulked among the trees bordering the beach. We made our way in the dark to the tiny Shiva temple near the beach. I prayed for the rain to please



please stop.

The next day the sun was out, the rains had stopped and I thanked the gods profusely. We sped past charming villages to the town of Malvan. Another stream had turned into a raging torrent and had swamped large swathes of land. I had scanned the Marathi newspaper that morning and, though I couldn't read the news, the images of flooded villages told the sad story. The floods were an annual affair, I was informed. That morning and the day before, we had made several anxious calls to figure out which roads

were cut off, revising our itinerary accordingly. In this government designated tourism-only district, the government's contribution seemed to be restricted to putting up signboards listing the attractions at town entrances and spoiling beautiful beaches by constructing ugly concrete structures on them.

Malvan is a pretty little town of pretty little shops and a surprisingly large number of restaurants. Sindhudurg Fort lies on an island off the coast, a five-minute boat ride from the town. For the first time I regretted coming here in the

monsoon—the 17th-century Chhatrapati Shivaji-built fort was off-limits, as no boat would ply on the rough seas. We headed off to Tarkarli beach instead, where I made my acquaintance with the aforementioned sad-eyed dog. I returned to Malvan for lunch. Good decision. The region is noted for its delicious coconut-based Malvani cuisine. And the eponymous town is the best place to sample some Malvani delicacies. Chaitanya was an excellent restaurant. I chose a prawn thali with a side serving of surmai fry. The mildly



Facing page (clockwise):  
Nandan Farms; and  
Pitruchaya's luxurious bath  
and terrace room; This page  
(clockwise): Amrutha serves  
lunch; the prawn thali at  
Malvan's Chaltanya; lunch at  
Nandan Farms



spiced, subtly sour small-prawn curry with a generous topping of chopped coriander was to die for.

I had saved the northern part of Sindhudurg for the end of my stay, as part of the route was flooded earlier. The day after my trip to Malvan I received news that the route was open and we made our way to Vijaydurg. Enroute, near the town of Shirgaon, is Pitruchaya, another Culture Aangan homestay. The Loke family lets out two rooms in their lovely home to tourists. We stopped for lunch, which consisted of rotis, rice, red

spinach and coconut fry, a coconut-based chicken curry and a chicken masala fry. Like every other meal on the trip, this lunch too was delicious.

The Vijaydurg Fort was able to alleviate my disappointment at missing out on a ramble through Sindhudurg. There are a couple of abandoned buildings inside the fort, overgrown with weeds, and there is a strong bat-smell to the place. But from the highest point, you can see the sea stretching out under you. A game of cricket was in progress on the lower grounds of the fort while a man fished

for his dinner from the lower ramparts. The world seemed at peace.

I visited Sawantwadi town on the last day of my trip. The town, lying in the shadows of the Sahayadris, was bustling with activity. This historic town is the seat of the Bhonsale dynasty. Today, it is also known for its lacquer furniture, hand-painted wooden crafts and the *ganjifa* playing cards. At the Sawantwadi Palace, a red laterite structure, these crafts are very much alive. The Palace Darbar Hall has been turned into a work area for the artists. I watched them paint

This page: Vijaydurg Fort; and tourists can see right to the bottom of the Nagartas Fall from the viewing bridge

## THE RUINS OF VIJAYDURG FORT ARE OVERGROWN WITH WEEDS BUT FROM THE HIGHEST POINT, YOU CAN SEE THE SEA STRETCHING OUT UNDER YOU



## THE INFORMATION



**GETTING THERE** BY AIR Goa's Dabolim is the closest airport. The border town of **Banda** is roughly 70km from the airport. There are many flights to Goa from all major Indian cities. BY TRAIN There are two daily trains from Mumbai to Sawantwadi: **Mandovi Express** (departs 6:55am, arrives 5:56pm; Rs 694 on 3A) and **Konkan Kanya** (departs 11pm, arrives 10am; Rs 694 on 3A). Apart from Sawantwadi, the trains also stop at Valbhavwadi Road, Kankavli, Sindhudurg and Kudal. Note that train services can be disrupted during the monsoon.

**HOMESTAYS** **Culture Aangan**, an NGO that

encourages the local arts and crafts of Sindhudurg, have helped three homeowners start homestays in the region. All homes are comfortable and the hosts friendly and helpful. The homes are **Nandan Farms** in Sawantwadi, **Shreeyog Paryatan** near Oras and **Pituchaya** at Shrigon. The all-inclusive tariff ranges from Rs 1,300 to 2,000 per person per night (depending on the room category). Culture Aangan also offers two 4N/5D packages for Rs 8,100 and Rs 11,500 (again depending on room category). The packages include accommodation, all meals, sightseeing and transport. Two more homestays are expected to open by December. See [www.cultureaangan.com](http://www.cultureaangan.com) for more information.

### WHAT TO SEE

- > The **Palace museum** in **Sawantwadi** has interesting antique woodcrafts and photographs of the royal family. Visitors can also watch artists creating **ganjifa cards**. The museum shop is a good place to buy lacquer woodcrafts and ganjifa cards. Do not miss **Kanekar Toys** in the market.
- > At **Amboli** check out **Nagartas Fall** and the **Hiranyakeshi temple**.
- > In **Vengurla** visit the town's market—a great place to buy kokum and kokum products as well as juicy alphonso mangoes in season (March to

May). Climb up from the jetty to the lighthouse.

The town beach, **Sagareshwar**, is beautiful.

- > Have some excellent **Malvani food** at one of the many good restaurants on Malvan's main street. The 17th-century **Sindhudurg Fort** is a short boat ride (Rs 30) from the town. During the monsoon, boats don't venture out if the seas are rough. **Tarkarli beach** is a great place to relax.
- > In North Sindhudurg, **Vijaydurg Fort** is a stunning structure. Nearby are the **Rameshwar** and **Kunkeshwar temples**. The **Devgad beach** is pretty and tranquil.

- > The **Pinguli Art Complex**, located near Kudal, showcases the art works—paintings, shadow puppets and string puppets—of the Thakar Adwasi community. They also organise shows for tourists and conduct workshops. See the Culture Aangan website for more details.

**WHAT TO EAT** Like most cuisines along the west coast of India, Malvani food also sees liberal use of **coconut**. But it gets its distinct taste from the proportion of spices ground to form the masala. The **seafood** is understandably very good. Vegetarians too will find an assortment of delicacies. Each meal is accompanied by the yummy kokum and coconut milk digestive, **sol kadi**. The region is said to produce the best **alphonsos**.



ganjifa cards, examined the antique woodwork, paintings and photographs in the museum, and purchased some hand-painted lacquer finished jewellery boxes from the museum shop. Later, I visited Kanekar Toys, a shop in town selling woodcrafts of every description,

from painted stools to ladles and jewellery boxes to key chains. But the shop's speciality, as the name suggests, are the toys. I gaped at extremely realistic cars, trucks, bullock carts, planes, animals of all species, Indianised babushka dolls, pencil-sharpeners shaped like colonial

soldiers, figurines with movable parts and many more delightful little pieces. I returned to Nandan Farms for a farewell lunch and found a packet of dried kokum next to my bed. I had told Amrutha, a couple of days before, that I wanted to buy some for my mother and she had thoughtfully arranged it for me. My stay at Amrutha's farm, which was extremely comfortable, was made special by these small touches.

At a time when you need to travel really far to escape the tourist hordes, I had discovered a beautiful region, still unspoiled and, at the same time, easily accessible. I had missed out on a number of sites; I wanted to explore the sea fort of Sindhudurg, stop at some of the tiny nameless villages that we drove past and see the underground Rameshwar Temple near Vijaydurg. As I made my way to Dabolim airport the sun was shining but I was already planning my next trip...maybe in April when the mango trees, now bereft of fruit, would be laden with succulent alphonsoes. Yes, April, come she will... •



# Swabian Summer

**Latha Anantharaman** in the southwestern corner of Germany, where the living is easy.  
Photographs by **Narendra Bisht**







In the southwest of Germany, the Swabian Forest, ruled by beech and oak and carpeted with dandelion, merges into the Black Forest like a symphony falling from a major to a minor key. In this more sombre realm, the light is shut out by close ranks of silver firs, and it is easy to see why it once inspired tales of lost children. But these acres are tended now, and the farmers have cut swathes through the firs to give the oaks, larches and maples a sporting chance. There used to be many kinds of trees once, as you can see from the famed cuckoo clocks of the Black Forest.

**Lake Titi (above);  
and tourists on the  
banks of the lake**

The craftsman at a wooded resort near the small town of Titisee conjures fairytale pictures for us, of the snowed-in farmer whittling leaves and birds from linden wood, and the pedlar trudging through towns in the summer to sell the dozen clocks strapped to his back.

The waters of Lake Titi are so clear that our host, who has taken us out in a boat, dips a glass into the lake and offers us a drink. Students like to hike from here to Feldberg, the highest peak in the Black Forest, and this has been a popular holiday spot since the railroad made it affordable to get here. The line runs past our



hotel, the Hofgut Sternen. A much older inn survives from the days when the place was called the Hölletal or Hell's Valley, for the robbers who lurked in the shadows to loot travellers. An Austrian princess named Marie Antoinette stopped at this inn on her way to her wedding. Goethe, Napoleon III and Anthony Trollope also slept here, severally. Red geraniums and warm pine panelling light up the new hotel, and good roads ensure there is always cheery company, but the forest itself remains cool and mysterious.

The forest and lake are just a few of the many beauties of the state of Baden-Württemberg, but green prevails over all. Immaculate woods snuggle up to impossibly tidy towns. In the state capital, Stuttgart, the cabbages grow right up to the runway, and you are always just a yodel away from a vineyard. From the city's television tower, the oldest in the world, you can see all of Stuttgart lying in the embrace of the forest.

The old city is crowded with the towers of its two palaces, its many churches and the pre-war railroad station. In its centre,

the Schlossplatz, medieval monuments jostle 21st-century glass boxes around generous open spaces that draw everyone and his pram out into the sunshine.

On the uppermost layer of the city's history, for now, is the Mercedes-Benz museum, housed in a building inspired by the double helix. Inside, visitors ride to the top to genuflect to the early Daimler motors and spiral down to lust after today's edgiest racecars. The museum opened two years ago and has drawn two million visitors. There is history and context enough to engage everyone, with



The Mercedes-Benz museum in Stuttgart

evocative photos and the goggles, hip flasks and other stylish impedimenta of road travel in its wonder years.

To gawp at more historical good living, we went to the residence palace at Ludwigsburg, a short ride from the city. The building was first conceived as a hunting palace and then scaled up from baroque to rococo, ultimately exploding in Napoleonic grandeur. The rooms are richly decorated in the Empire style and there are eye-popping vistas in the palace and grounds. At the end of one avenue is Favorit, a pleasure palace to which pow-

der-wigged couples sneaked off for extracurricular love-making, and the fashion museum features embroidered shoes, ivory buttons and other essentials of princely life.

In the charming smaller towns around Stuttgart, medieval streets and houses are lovingly preserved. The 8th-century town of Esslingen, a short train ride away, has a town hall ornamented with astronomical clocks. The cobbled square in front of it is a relaxed setting for a slow coffee. The town is also the home of the Kessler winery, Germany's oldest pro-

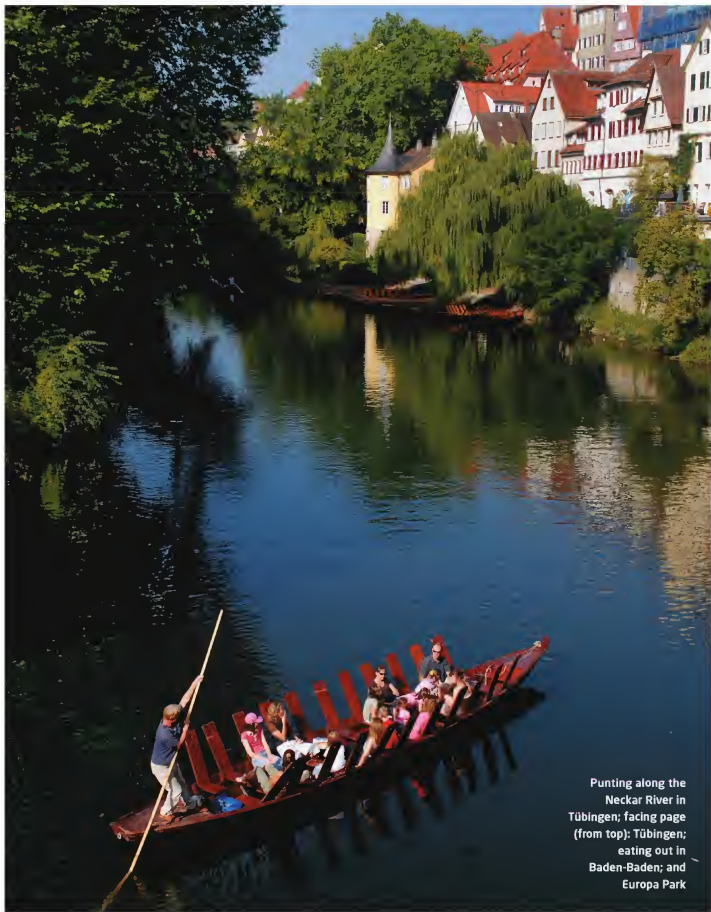
ducer of sparkling wine, and a wine tour takes us through chilly caverns lined with cobwebbed bottles of sekt, riesling and chardonnay.

Some 44km away from Stuttgart is Tübingen, a medieval university town. Here we can still see fragments of a 13th-century city wall, the 16th-century Hohenbüdingen Castle, the Protestant Seminary where Hegel and Kepler swotted, the bookbinder's shop in which Hermann Hesse apprenticed and the workshop in which Goethe published *Faust*. Even the wall against which Goethe threw up is duly marked by a plaque.

Its illustrious names aside, Tübingen is perfect for idle walks. It has a richly painted city hall and other half-timbered buildings of the 15th century, solemn cathedrals and a lively market square. The Neckar River is divided at Tübingen by a longish island crowned by an avenue of plane trees. Punting on the river is a blissful meander past drooping willows and the back gardens of medieval and modern houses. It's not always so mellow. The boat races held every July are "like rugby on the water," according to our boatman. More than 50 boats get on the river at once and they must round the island and come back through a narrow gap called the needle's eye. The winning team gets 100 litres of beer and a roast pig, and the last team to finish must down half a litre of codliver oil.

Further afield, the Hohenzollern Castle, ancient seat of the Kings of Prussia, is high on drama. From a distance the castle

## IN THE MERCEDES-BENZ MUSEUM, VISITORS GENUFLECT TO EARLY DAIMLER MOTORS AND LUST AFTER TODAY'S RACIEST CARS



Punting along the Neckar River in Tübingen; facing page (from top): Tübingen; eating out in Baden-Baden; and Europa Park



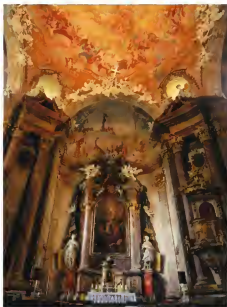
looks like a magnificent stand of firs on top of a hill, and each subsequent view is so grand, there seems to be an overture playing in our heads as we close in. The present building was constructed in the mid-1800s, less as a residence than as a monument to honour a family that was by then ruling from Berlin. We walked through its splendid salons, bedchambers, ancestral hall and library, and peeked into the chapels. There is a museum packed with treasures of the Prussian kings, including a sea-blue gown stitched with pearls and diamonds. The tower is everything a castle tower should be, with views out to forever.

Even the amusement parks in Germany have real castles. Overlooking Europa-Park, which was first started by a fabrica-

## EACH VIEW OF THE CASTLE IS SO GRAND, THERE'S AN OVERTURE PLAYING IN OUR HEADS AS WE CLOSE IN

tor of park rides to display his works, is the Schloss Balthasar, a smallish castle that was his family home. The park is still a family-run business, and it is fun without being frenzied. Its streets and squares from 'Sweden', 'Portugal' and other recreated countries are filled with real transported chapels and shops as well as authentic wood and stone reproductions. We bypassed the fjord rafting ride, where we might get drenched with one well-timed push of a button by any six-year-old bystander. Since we insisted on staying dry, we were led instead to the Silver Star. As a press group, we were cut to the front of the queue, hustled into our seats and pinned down by safety bars before I got a good look at Germany's highest roller coaster. By then the cars were ratcheting up a 60-degree slope, and in the next seven minutes, I died a thousand deaths.





Clockwise from far left: the TV tower in Stuttgart; interiors of Ludwigsburg Palace, decorated in the Empire style; Tübingen's city centre; and the façade of Ludwigsburg Palace

The spa town of Baden-Baden has been fashionable since the 19th century, when the casino was introduced here. It was the stamping ground of dukes and kaisers then and still has an aristocratic air. There are tourists in horse-drawn carriages and seductive shop windows filled with strange hats in preparation for the autumn's International Horse Races. I wondered briefly why European women can't watch horses run without raising edifices of feather and tulle on their heads, but in the summer sunshine, amid the fountains, petunias and apple-cheeked toddlers of this happy town, I was in no mood to pursue riddles.

There are any number of pretty walks in parks and cobbled streets, and venerable pillared halls, but the main attractions after the casinos are the spas, where you can get rubbed down with bananas, chocolate, coffee, pomegranate seed oil or yogurt. The popular Caracalla Spa can hold 600 in its extensive halls. Ruins of the ancient baths are preserved nearby, where Roman soldiers used to bathe even their horses in the thermal springs to keep them in top condition. I had no swimsuit and didn't feel like stumping up 100 euros for those on the racks, so I considered the Friedrichsbad, where one bathes in the buff in a gorgeous old building. But there were seven of us in the group. The altogether was one thing, but all together?

Back at Stuttgart, the Wine Fest has begun in the lanes around the old palace. The stalls are dressed up with gingham and lace and each serves its own wine. An accordion player encourages the singing of drinking songs. The food is traditional German fare—red meat, flour dumplings, and pork grease to dip your pretzels in. Beefsteak and four glasses of wine are the way to a man's heart, according to a Swabian saying, and early in the evening we are all already in a fug of happiness. •

TANHOY



#### GETTING THERE

Lufthansa has flights to **Frankfurt** from Delhi (from RS 33,000 return on economy, inclusive of taxes; [www.lufthansa.com](http://www.lufthansa.com)), with connections by air or rail to Stuttgart. There are rail connections from Stuttgart to Baden-Baden and Titisee.

#### STUTTGART

**WHERE TO STAY** We stayed at the stunning new **Mövenpick** at Stuttgart Airport (€130-425; +49-711-553440, [www.moenvick-stuttgart-airport.com](http://www.moenvick-stuttgart-airport.com)) and also at the **Hotel Rieker**, which has spare but well-designed and spotless rooms (€107-132, 4-day weekend rates available, 221311, [www.hotel-rieker.de](http://www.hotel-rieker.de)). It is opposite the railway station and near the sights. It has no AC rooms. The concierge suggests you open a window.

#### WHAT TO SEE & DO

The **Mercedes-Benz Museum** (Mercedesstrasse, entrance: €8, Tue-Sun, 9am-6pm; [www.mercedes-benz.com/museum](http://www.mercedes-benz.com/museum)) must be visited for a fascinating

glimpse into the German chapter of automation history.

**Ludwigsburg Palace** (entrance: €6 to palace, €3 for museums with audio guide, Tue-Sun, 9am-6pm during mid-Mar to mid-Nov, otherwise 9am-5pm; Schlossstrasse, Ludwigsburg, [www.ludwigsburg.de](http://www.ludwigsburg.de)), 12km north of Stuttgart, is one of Germany's largest baroque palaces.

#### WHERE TO EAT The Cube

**Restaurant**, on top of the Museum of Art, has superb views of the city square and the food is served very haute. The nearby **Ochs 'n' Willy** serves excellent gourmet fare and the salad bar is generous. Equally chic is **Plenum**, set near the opera house and galleries. The more traditional

**Stuttgarter Stäffele** features onion soup (crusted with cheese and actually served in an onion). You can tour the wine cellar, where the owner maintains a private collection of more than 270 wines. More homey fare of doughy spätzle, pork grease and lard sandwiches

can be found at beer places everywhere. The **Kessler Champagne Factory** in nearby Esslingen has a bar and offers tours of its cellars. Stuttgart also has 11 Indian restaurants.

#### BADEN-BADEN

**WHERE TO STAY** We stayed at the five-star **Dorint Maison Messmer** (€152-378 for rooms, and suites up to €999, 722130120, [www.dorint.com/baden-baden](http://www.dorint.com/baden-baden)) on Werderstrasse. The hotel used to host the Kaisers and is still fit for royalty.

**WHERE TO EAT** The Restaurant **Kurhaus**, right next to the casino, serves pan-European cuisine at tables set with beribboned bottles of pink bubbly. There is also an upscale Indian restaurant, **Namaskar**, in the centre of the town.

#### WHAT TO SEE & DO

The main level of the **Casino Baden-Baden** (Kurhaus, [www.casino-baden-baden.de](http://www.casino-baden-baden.de)), with black jack, roulette and poker tables, is maintained in its 19th-century splendour (open daily 2pm-2am Sun-Thur; 2pm-3am Fri and Sat). Traditional games, day pass €3. Slot machines, day pass €1. Dress is formal. You must be 21 years or older to enter. Bring your passport.

**Caracalla Spa** (Romerplatz, [www.coto-calia.de](http://www.coto-calia.de)) has two outdoor saunas, six indoor saunas, rock grotto, aroma steam baths, saltwater inhalation rooms and pools. Entrance: €13 (2hr), €15 (3hr), €17 (4hr). Children under seven not allowed, but childcare available for children over 18 months. Open daily, 8am-10pm. You need a swimsuit.

**Friedrichsbad** (Romerplatz, [\[friedrichsbad.de\]\(http://www.friedrichsbad.de\)\) has 17 stages of showers, scrubs, and dips in warm, hot and cold water, ending in an ornate domed hall. Visitors can also opt for various treatments with herb poultices and the newly introduced huna hana, a Polynesian massage using conch shells. Open daily, 9am-10pm. Entrance: €21 \(3hr, just bathing\), €29 \(3.5hr, with massage\). Children under 14 not allowed. Visitors bathe in the nude and on Sundays men and women mix in all stages.](http://www.roemisch-</a></p>
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There are guided tours of the historic premises every 30 min., €4 per person.



#### A hearty meat platter

#### BLACK FOREST

**WHERE TO STAY** The **Best Western Hofgut Sternen** in the forest (€49-79, family suites available, 76529010) has snug rooms and overlooks a 15th-century inn, a medieval toll house and a cuckoo clock workshop. This and the

**Alemannenhof Hotel** on Lake Titisee are owned by Drubba Hotels & Tourism. See [www.drubba.com](http://www.drubba.com) for details on special accommodation packages, tours and boat cruises.

**Europa-Park** (1805-868610) has a number of

themed hotels, including a monastery, with rooms from €120. Various family and group deals are available, and there are less expensive guesthouses and rooms outside the park. There are also campsite cabins and parking spaces for 200 caravans.

#### WHERE TO EAT

The restaurant at **Hofgut Sternen** features trout and other delicacies from the pure lake waters and of course the incomparable Black Forest cake, flavoured with schnapps. For die-hard dal-chawal families, Chef Govind provides authentic Indian fare.

#### WHAT TO SEE & DO

**Europa-Park** (Rust, near Freiburg, [www.europapark.de](http://www.europapark.de)) entrance €31.50 (adults), €28 (children 4-11 yr and seniors over 60 yr). Two-day tickets and annual tickets available.

**Hohenzollern Castle** (Burg Hohenzollern, [www.burg-hohenzollern.com](http://www.burg-hohenzollern.com)) entrance €8 to join regular tour, open daily, 9am-5:30pm (Mar 16 to Oct 31), 10am-4:30pm (Nov 1 to Mar 15). Guided group tours in English must be booked in advance.

Latha Anantharaman

# THE WALLED CITY OF LO MANTHANG

A long walk is all that stands between you and the once forbidden kingdom of Mustang. Text and photographs by **Milan Moudgill**



Strategically positioned on the trade route, the city of Lo Manthang became so wealthy that it needed to secure itself behind a 26ft-high wall punctuated by a series of 14 watchtowers. A single gate allowed access to the 180 houses within, which till a few years ago shut at dusk! The four-storey white building in the centre is the palace of King Jigme Parbal Bista, and the red boxes are the Champa, Tugchen, and Chyodi gompas. Tibet is just a few hours' walk away, over the Kore La (15,300ft).







Green is a rare colour in this desolate and barren landscape. Wherever possible mountain streams have been diverted through manmade channels and brought long distances to where land can be terraced—resulting in a small oasis in this harsh land, around which small settlements have come up. Here a mule trail passes the barley and wheat fields of Gyakar.





The trek is strenuous but not as a consequence of the altitude—which starts at about 9,500ft and touches only 13,500ft at the highest passes—but because the trail continually dips and climbs over the ridges, stretching out the days. Here a trekker makes a typical steep descent to Dhakmar on the return route.





The more 'worldly' Sakyapa Buddhist sub-sect dominates here. All chortens, mani walls and monasteries in Mustang are marked with the Sakyapa colours: grey, ochre and white against blood-red walls; colours derived from and which echo the landscape. Here a woman walks past a row of chortens that abut the 15th-century Thupchen Gomba.



The Loba culture is largely Tibetan, but the community has not fully shaken off the Nepali-Hindu influences that resound in their backyard. They follow a caste hierarchy: only the upper-caste Gurung and the nobility (Bista), like the man in this picture, live inside Lo Manthang. The blacksmiths, musicians, butchers, etc live in settlements to the east of the city.



Horsemen cross the Lo La (13,500ft). They follow the same trade route to the south that once brought wool and salt from the Tibetan plateau and ran it down the Kali Gandaki. All that changed with the Chinese occupation of Tibet. But trader genes die hard: with the onset of winter, most of the population heads south towards warmer climes; some even to Ludhiana to buy sweaters in wholesale and then retail them in Varanasi!



## THE INFORMATION



**GETTING THERE** Fly to Kathmandu (approx Rs 12,000 return on economy from Delhi on Royal Nepal Airlines; [www.royalnepal-airlines.com](http://www.royalnepal-airlines.com)). Allow a day for the permits and paperwork. The drive to Pokhara takes about 6

hours and the 20-min flight to Jomsom (\$165) leaves early the next morning, from where the trek starts. Yeti Airlines ([www.yetiairlines.com](http://www.yetiairlines.com)), Gorkha Airlines ([www.gorkhaairlines.com](http://www.gorkhaairlines.com)) and Agni Air ([www.agni-air.com](http://www.agni-air.com)) operate the Pokhara-

Jomsom link. **Caution:** Mustang is characterised by strong afternoon winds, and there is only a small window in the morning (starting at 6am) during which it is safe for small propeller aircrafts to slip in and out of Jomsom. The flights are flown and landed visually, and very much at the mercy of weather conditions and the circuit is notorious for cancellations. Plan cushion days to accommodate these delays.

**PERMITS** A special permit (\$500) is needed that allows you 10 days (and 9 nights) in the restricted area. The restricted area lies ahead of Kagbeni. There is no discount on this permit fee for Indians, but we pay the SAARC rate of NRs 200 for another (Annapurna Conservation Area entry)

permit, for which foreigners pay NRs 2,000. Every extra day that you wish to stay inside the restricted area adds \$50 to the special permit fee. **Your operator** takes care of the paperwork, permits, bookings and arrangements, restricting your part to showing up, paying and handing over your passport when required. A large part of the fee is used for development projects in Mustang.

**TREKKING RESTRICTIONS** Mustang opened to trekking in 1991 with caution. It was deemed a **Restricted Area** and regulations were introduced to protect the environment and culture of the area. The Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) administers trekking in the region. Accordingly, it is mandatory to go with a

**government-registered operator.** One cannot trek alone—there must be two 'clients' in the group. Your group must be self-sufficient in all respects. To prevent taxing local resources, you are required to carry into Mustang all that you will need. A copy of these goods carried in must be registered with the authorities at Jomsom, and an equivalent amount of garbage needs to be brought back. In fact, a clearance certificate is issued against this. The garbage is then deposited at an allocated dumping site. A list of additional 'Do Nots' prohibits filming, charity, purchase of antiques and disturbing wildlife. See [www.ntnc.org.np](http://www.ntnc.org.np)

**THE TREK** The 14th-century walled city of **Lo Manthang** is home to



Jigmet Parbal Bista, the Raja of Lo. The area is a well-preserved showpiece of the **Sakyapa Buddhist** tradition and lifestyle.

With 15 days from Kathmandu to Kathmandu, between 9,500ft to a maximum elevation of 14,000ft, this is a hard trek with a couple of long 10-hour days. The journey takes you along an old trade route across a beautiful, raw and arid landscape of multi-hued rolling hills reminiscent of the Tibetan landscape.

**THE ROUTE** Kagbeni is about 3 hours from Jomsom. Day 1 takes you along the left bank of the Kali Gandaki, crossing over to **Chele** (10,000ft, 6hr). Day 2 is particularly strenuous as you leave the Kali Gandaki and climb to the west. The trail undulates continuously,

touching a maximum elevation of 12,550ft, passing through the villages of Samar, Bheni and Syangmochen, bringing you nearly 10 hours later to

**Geling** (11,400ft). This day could well be broken into two stages. On Day 3, on leaving Geling, one battles with an unrelenting climb to Nyi La (13,100ft), and onwards to the beautiful oasis of Ghami, by the Tangmar Chu. On the other side of the river, along the trail is a **spectacular 'mani' wall**—the longest in Nepal. One reaches Charang (11,500 ft, 7-8hr) by the early evening. Day 4 is relatively short (5-6hr) and ends at the objective of the trek, the walled city of Lo Manthang (12,500ft). It makes sense to take an extra day at Lo Manthang to rest and recuperate, as well

as soak in the city-life. There are two valleys, **Chosar and Thingkar**, to the north of the city, which make for interesting exploration on horseback.

The route back follows the same trail, but luckily there are a few **deviations** possible. From Lo Manthang you can come back to Ghami via Lo Gekar and Dhakmar, after visiting the oldest monastery in the region, the **Ghar Gompa** (8-9hr on this route). The next day affords another detour—one that bypasses Geling, leaving the main trail just ahead of the Nyi La, and takes the high road via Tama Gaon to Syangmochen.

**WHEN TO GO** Mustang is in the rain shadow, and so has an extended season that covers the monsoon. The best period to go would be

late **March** to early **November**

**WHERE TO STAY** Local infrastructure is poor, and you must stay in **tented camps**. Villages are several hours apart, and have come up around the only water sources in the area—this means you too will need to break journey at these villages. Basic lodges in some of the larger villages offer dorm-style bedding, and a rare opportunity for a hot (solar-heated) bath.

**TOUR OPERATORS** There are a few operators based in Kathmandu who offer a Mustang itinerary. Go with the government-recognised agencies, and check for experience: **Makalu Adventure** ([www.makoluadventure.com](http://www.makoluadventure.com)) is probably the best. Check **Sherpa**

**International Trekking & Expedition** ([www.sherpainternationaltreks.com](http://www.sherpainternationaltreks.com)).

**Unique Path Trekking & Expedition** ([www.nepaltrekinfo.com](http://www.nepaltrekinfo.com)) and **Earth Bound Expeditions** ([www.earthboundexp.com](http://www.earthboundexp.com)) as well.

**COST** This is a fairly expensive trip, with the Kathmandu to Kathmandu costs ranging between Rs 80,000 and Rs 95,000 depending upon the group size. This covers everything—from the 10-day permit, the Pokhara-Jomsom-Pokhara flight, board and lodge for three nights in Kathmandu and one night in Pokhara in three-star hotels, government taxes, all guide and porter fees and their insurance, hiring of mules, and full board on trek including all necessary camping gear.

**Milan Moudgill**

# Where on EARTH?



These gigantic, enigmatic drawings on the desert sand have intrigued archaeologists since their discovery in the 1930s. The etchings, almost a thousand in number and varying from drawings of animals and trees to geometric patterns and straight lines, are spread over an area of nearly 500 sq km. People have spent decades trying to explain the purpose of these patterns, which date from 200 BC to 600 AD. People have called these lines a navigational map for aliens, a giant astronomical chart and drawings by ancient gods. While each theory has its own group of followers, the exact purpose of these lines remain unknown. Where are they located?



## WINNER

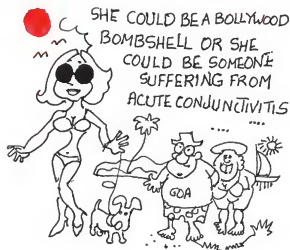
AUGUST 2008

RAJNEESH BATRA New Delhi  
In the August quiz, we featured  
the Matterhorn

Mail your entries to 'Outlook Traveller Quiz', AB-10  
Safdarjung Enclave, New Delhi-110 029 by October  
31. Email submissions will not be considered.

One lucky reader who answers correctly will win a pair  
of CAT sunglasses.





Do you think you are Raja Harishchandra?

MORARJI DESAI